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4 United States Senate,
5 Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
6 House of Representatives,
7 Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
8 Washington, D.C.

12 Senators Present: Isakson, Moran, Boozman, Cassidy,
13 Rounds, Tillis, Sullivan, Blackburn, Tester, Sanders, Brown,
14 Blumenthal, Hirono, and Manchin.

15 Representatives Present: Takano, Brownley, Lamb,
16 Levin, Rose, Brindisi, Cisneros, Lee, Underwood, Cunningham,
17 Pappas, Allred, Roe, Bilirakis, Bost, Bergman, Banks, and
18 Meuser.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN TAKANO

20 Chairman Takano. Good morning. The Joint Hearing to
21 Receive the Legislative Presentation of the American Legion
22 is now called to order. I will begin with my opening
23 statement.

24 Good morning, Commander Reistad, and welcome to
25 everyone in the House and Senate Joint Hearing to Receive

1 the Legislative Presentation of the American Legion. I am
2 honored to be here with Chairman Isakson and Senator Tester
3 and Ranking Member Roe, and all members of the House and
4 Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs.

5 First I would like to thank Commander Reistad for being
6 here today and welcome every Legionnaire here today and
7 those who could not join us in person but are watching from
8 home.

9 Commander, I want to begin by recognizing the tireless
10 advocates who work every day on behalf of the American
11 Legion. We rely on the American Legion in our districts and
12 states back home, and here in Washington, D.C., to be the
13 voice for the millions of veterans you represent throughout
14 the country.

15 I would also like to specifically recognize members
16 from my own home state of California. Are you in the house?

17 [Cheers.]

18 Chairman Takano. All right. All right. California
19 American Legion Boys State right here. Thank you.

20 [Applause.]

21 Chairman Takano. And, by the way, I just like to add,
22 now more than ever we benefit from the civics lessons that
23 are taught through American Legion Boys State and Girls
24 State, and I know that the tremendous volunteer effort
25 through the auxiliary and your membership, what it takes to

1 stage those Boys State and Girls State events throughout the
2 country. And America certain benefits from having that
3 civics education and leadership development that you
4 provide.

5 For 100 years--and I realize that last year was your
6 100th year anniversary since your founding, and a very
7 poignant founding since the World War I and such a
8 consequential war for the world and our country--members of
9 your organization have been on the front lines as a strong
10 voice on Capitol Hill ensuring Congress fulfills its promise
11 to veterans. We look to you to guide our work and to hold
12 us accountable to the veterans and their families. You make
13 sure the work we undertake is done in the best interest of
14 veterans. And with your help, we have seen a lot of
15 successes over the years, and we will need your continued
16 input as we move through the 116th Congress.

17 Reading through your testimony I want to say that your
18 concerns are my concerns. This afternoon, the House
19 Committee on Veterans' Affairs will have Secretary Wilkie
20 testifying on the state of the VA and what needs to be done
21 to achieve our vision for VA through the year 2030. Our VA
22 2030 plan is simple. It is a future look at what we
23 envision as the ideal VA, a system worth saving for all
24 veterans, no matter the generation or conflict in which they
25 served. That starts with getting implementation of the

1 Mission Act right so veterans can access care at VA
2 hospitals and clinics and with community providers.

3 I hold with your similar concerns regarding hiring and
4 retention. We must continue to find constructive ways to
5 bring the best and brightest to VA once they are there, and
6 once they are there we need to keep them.

7 Keeping pace with the fastest-growing population of
8 veterans is crucial. Women veterans need to know that VA is
9 for them.

10 We agree with your assessment that no veteran should
11 have to choose between caring for a child and receiving
12 health care, and we are proud to report that the House
13 passed the Veterans Access to Child Care Act just a few
14 weeks ago so that veterans who are parents to young children
15 can see their VA provider without having to worry about
16 finding and affording child care, and thank you, Julia
17 Brownley, for your bill. Thank you.

18 [Applause.]

19 Chairman Takano. And I want just as much
20 acknowledgment for our Republican colleagues because this
21 bill passed with 400 votes in the House, and I do not want
22 to pass over the hard work of my Ranking Member, Phil Roe.
23 Thank you, Phil, for your work on that bill as well.

24 [Applause.]

25 Chairman Takano. And I know and trust that Senator

1 Isakson will burst this through the Senate in no time, in
2 zero seconds flat. Right, Senator?

3 Chairman Isakson. Zero.

4 Chairman Takano. Zero. We know how fast they work
5 over there in the Senate.

6 And we will continue to work with you to advance
7 benefits to all Vietnam veterans serving on land and sea,
8 especially those exposed to Agent Orange. We will double
9 our efforts to end homelessness and strive to find and care
10 for every veteran who may contemplating suicide.

11 And while I just touched on a few of the issue areas
12 that are important to you and your membership, know that I
13 am committed to helping advance your priorities in the
14 coming year. I look forward to hearing your testimony
15 today, and thank you again for your tireless advocacy of the
16 veteran community.

17 And with that I now recognize Chairman Isakson for his
18 opening statement.

19 OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN ISAKSON

20 Chairman Isakson. Thank you very much, Chairman
21 Takano, and congratulations to rising to Chair of the House
22 Committee on Veterans' Affairs, and to Phil Roe, I want to
23 tell you what a great pleasure and privilege it was for me
24 to work with you for four years as your chairmanship in the
25 House. I appreciate the things you did to support us. We

1 have been a great team for the VA for the last four years.
2 Jon Tester, who is my Ranking Member in the Senate, is my
3 partner. We are not adversaries. We are not in different
4 parties. We are Americans, just like our soldiers are on
5 the battlefield. We recognize heroism not by party.

6 [Applause.]

7 Chairman Isakson. And we particularly appreciate all
8 you are doing.

9 I have to tell you, I want to thank you and Mr.
10 Reistad, Commander, and the others for the four corners
11 Fireside Chat that we celebrated two days ago with you at
12 the Washington Hilton.

13 [Applause.]

14 Chairman Isakson. That was a great way for us to be
15 able to talk you in a setting that is much better than
16 standing up at a podium and speaking, which ends up being a
17 lecture and that is not any fun for anybody. But to sit
18 there in a nice overly soft chair, I might add for an hour,
19 and stay awake and be cogent, that is a good challenge for
20 old men anytime, so we are glad to do it.

21 I want to congratulate you on your 100th anniversary.
22 I mean, that is a great milestone. My wife and I celebrated
23 our 50th wedding anniversary last year. I know what big
24 anniversaries mean. I hope I make 200 on that, but if I do
25 not, I am glad you all made it to 100 in terms of the

1 American Legion. I appreciate very much your organization
2 and what you mean to all of us.

3 We have a big agenda this year and our agenda in the
4 Senate, from my standpoint--and I think it is shared by all--
5 -is to see to it that all the things we did the last three
6 or four years--the new GI Bill, the accountability bill, the
7 appeals bill, the Whistleblower Act--all of the things that
8 we did, now is the time to see to it they are in place and
9 working. You do not want to go pile a whole lot of new
10 stuff on somebody until they swallow what you have just
11 given them, and we just gave them a lot to swallow.

12 My last conversation before I came in here was with Mr.
13 Wilkie, who is going to see you this afternoon, hobbling in
14 on his bad Achilles' heel, so do not give him too much
15 trouble. He is in agony, in pain. Any of you who have had
16 an Achilles problem know that is not comfortable. But he is
17 a great leader at the VA and we appreciate him very much.

18 And I have told him we will share the same commitment
19 to all of you. We will do everything we can to make the
20 promises that we made reality, make them reality as fast as
21 possible. We will make mistakes, but there are a couple of
22 mistakes we will not make. One, we are not going to make
23 the mistake of privatizing the VA. I can guarantee you
24 that. We are not going to do that.

25 [Applause.]

1 Chairman Isakson. But we are going to see that we
2 empower the private sector to be a force multiplier for the
3 VA so people can have timely appointments, the best of care
4 that is available in the United States of America goes to
5 our veterans, and we will not stop until we get that done
6 for everybody. It is important that we make sure the VA,
7 all the things we have bragged about for two years, become a
8 reality that you expect every day when you go to the VA.

9 We appreciate the people who volunteered and fought for
10 this country, risked their life for this country, and stand
11 for this country to support it. When you come to Washington
12 to advocate for the American Legion, there are a lot of
13 things you could do. But you are not just advocating for
14 yourself. You are advocating for all those who went before
15 you, in the military, in service to the country.

16 So thank you for what you have done, thank you for
17 being here today, and thank you for being part of the
18 greatest country on the face of this Earth, the United
19 States of America.

20 Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

21 [Applause.]

22 Chairman Takano. Thank you. Thank you, Chairman
23 Isakson. And I now yield to the Ranking Member of the
24 Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, Senator Tester from
25 Montana.

1 OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR TESTER

2 Senator Tester. Thank you, Chairman Takano, and thank
3 you for being here.

4 Commander Reistad, let us see. I saw you on Monday and
5 I saw you on Tuesday. Hell, I see you every day, more than
6 I have got fingers to count with. So it is great to have
7 you hear today.

8 Look, I have enjoyed working with you and your
9 legislative staff and great Legionnaires like Mike Shepard,
10 Cliff Larson, Bill White in Montana. You guys have been
11 great and I want to thank you for your leadership, Commander
12 Reistad, as the American Legion is here before us, because
13 we have accomplished a lot but we still have a lot to do.

14 As I have said before, as I said Monday, and I think I
15 said it again yesterday, Congress needs to take its cues
16 from you. You know better than anyone how VA is performing
17 across this country. You know what improvements should be
18 made on behalf veterans and their families. Your members
19 are beneficiaries of the VA health care and utilize VA
20 programs every day. Listening to veterans should not be a
21 courtesy from the VA. It should be mandatory.

22 Commander, we need to hear your view on gender
23 disparities at the VA, what can be done to provide more
24 equitable treatment for our women veterans; on whether the
25 VA is doing enough to address the unacceptable rate of

1 veteran suicides; on implementation of the Harry Colmery
2 Act, a law which builds upon 75 years of the GI Bill and
3 American Legion history.

4 But most importantly today, we need to know whether you
5 believe the implementation of the VA Mission Act, the
6 largest overhaul of veterans health care in a generation, is
7 being carried out as Congress intended, and more
8 importantly, as veterans deserve. There is very real
9 concern from the veterans community and Congress that the
10 recently proposed access standards will steer a
11 disproportionate amount of veterans and taxpayer dollars to
12 the private section.

13 And despite language in the Mission Act, it is clear
14 that the VA does not intend on holding community providers
15 to the same standards as VA providers. We need to make sure
16 that does not happen. So we will end up sending more
17 veterans into the communities for lower-quality care while
18 being unable to ensure they get it done in a timely manner.
19 These are all challenges but challenges that we can fix.

20 To top it off, nobody can tell us how many veterans
21 will ultimately be impacted by these access or standards, or
22 how much it will cost. All we know is that community care
23 is more expensive than VA care and that billions have been
24 paid to third-party administrators that should have gone
25 directly to improving the lives of veterans across this

1 country.

2 VA refers to concerns about the hollowing-out of the VA
3 care is false and predictable, but everyone in this room, I
4 believe, knows that they are real. Veterans deserve more
5 than that. They deserve the truth and they deserve a system
6 that will work, a system that is built and improved with the
7 input from the American Legion and others.

8 Commander Reistad, it is great to have you here today.
9 We need to keep meeting like this, quite frankly. And I
10 want to welcome you and I want to welcome everybody you
11 represent on behalf of the American Legion, their families,
12 and the veterans you serve. Thank you.

13 [Applause.]

14 Chairman Takano. I would now like to--thank you,
15 Ranking Member Tester, and now I would like to recognize my
16 colleague on the House side, the Ranking Member, Dr. Phil
17 Roe. You are now recognized for your opening statement.

18 OPENING STATEMENT OF DR. ROE

19 Dr. Roe. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I also want to
20 associate my comments with Senator Isakson. In the last two
21 years we were able to accomplish a lot of great things for
22 our veterans, and it would not have happened without the
23 leadership up here. And I said this yesterday. One of the
24 reasons I do not think this is going to be as long a meeting
25 as some of them are is that Tim Walz, who you all know, who

1 is now Governor of Minnesota, used to bring either one or
2 two 20-ounce Mountain Dews. So this is not a two-20-ounce
3 Mountain Dew hearing, I hope.

4 Commander Reistad, to you and all your members of the
5 American Legion and the American Legion Auxiliary and Sons
6 of the American Legion who are with us today--and I want to
7 thank the auxiliary members. And I said this yesterday.
8 You know, I was deployed, and when we get deployed we forget
9 about the responsibilities we leave the family. We have a
10 mission and we go accomplish that mission. But there is
11 another mission too, and that is to keep your family
12 together, to look after your family, and all the things at
13 home. So thank you, auxiliary members, for being our
14 wingman and our backup. Thank you very much for that.

15 [Applause.]

16 Dr. Roe. It is an honor for me to be here today, and
17 if there are any Legionnaires--I think there are--my fellow
18 Tennesseans, would you please stand up and be recognized, or
19 hold your hand up, either one, if you are here?

20 Yep, there they are in the back. Thank you, guys.

21 [Applause.]

22 Dr. Roe. I know from personal experience the
23 commitment to country and to service that the American
24 Legion members exemplify in communities, including mine,
25 across this great nation. I also know, from personal

1 experience, that the leadership that the American Legion's
2 top-notch executive and legislative team exemplify are right
3 here in our nation's capital.

4 Last Congress saw a record number of transformative
5 pieces of legislation signed into law to reform the
6 Department of Veterans Affairs in both large and small ways,
7 and that would not have been possible without the
8 dedication, partnership, and support of the American Legion.
9 And one of the things that I did as I began to work through
10 this was that you all--and we did not always agree, as you
11 well know--but we came in and worked these differences out.
12 It was a model for how legislation could go. You have a
13 different viewpoint than I might have, we got in a room and
14 worked out those differences, and I think we can all be
15 proud of what we did.

16 I look forward to continuing the collaboration with
17 you, Commander Reistad, to ensure that the legislation we
18 worked so hard to see signed into law is implemented as we
19 intended, and serves to further our common mission to uphold
20 President Lincoln's promise to care for those who have borne
21 the battle.

22 Last week the Veterans Appeals and Improvement and
23 Modernization Act, or AMA, went live. The AMA completely
24 revamped the way disability claims and appeals are processed
25 at the VA and critically gives the veterans greater choice

1 and control over how their appeal is handled at the VA.

2 Let me give you just a personal story. About a month
3 ago I was in Nashville. I went to the RO, went to the VA
4 hospital there. On the way out the door I met, I think, an
5 eight-year Marine reservist who served in the '70s. He did
6 not go to Vietnam but he served in the '70s. He had tried
7 for seven years to get his claim done. He had decided to go
8 with the RAMP program. In 90 days he had what took seven
9 years. I mean, this man was grinning from ear to ear. He
10 could be a poster child, and I hope it works that way for
11 many other veterans. I was really pleased when I just
12 bumped into him sort of accidentally there at the VA.

13 As you know, another thing very near and dear to my
14 heart, and I know to yours as well, is the fight for our
15 Blue Water Navy veterans. I have carried that fight for
16 almost 10 years. I want to get that done, get that off, and
17 treat these veterans the same as very other veteran that has
18 served in Vietnam was. So I would appreciate your help with
19 that.

20 [Applause.]

21 Dr. Roe. And I know Senator Isakson and Senator
22 Tester, they were great partners with this and worked very
23 hard to get that done, and I feel confident that I know
24 Chairman Takano is ready to get it done also, and we both
25 already dropped legislation for that.

1 Another top priority of mine, as others have said, is
2 effective and ongoing oversight of the VA Mission Act. The
3 Mission Act is a wide-ranging piece of legislation, and when
4 it was enacted it impacted virtually every facet of the VA
5 health care system and increased access to high-quality care
6 in VA medical facilities in the community and via
7 telehealth. It resulted in a VA health care system that is
8 stronger, that are able to care for veterans and their
9 caregivers both today and for generations to come, and this
10 will not privatize the VA.

11 That said, a law as transformative as the Mission Act
12 does not come with an instruction manual, and I anticipate
13 there will be some stumbling blocks and struggles in the
14 weeks and months ahead that will once again require our
15 effort to overcome.

16 I remain committed to that process and to keeping my
17 door open to the American Legion throughout the process. I
18 will also continue to hold Secretary Wilkie's feet to the
19 fire with regard to the implementation of the Harry W.
20 Colmery Veterans Education Assistance Act of 2017, until I
21 am confident that every veteran has received the benefits of
22 which they are entitled and the implementation of the
23 Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability and
24 Whistleblower Protect Act of 2017, until I am confident that
25 the VA is appropriately adjudicating allegations of

1 misconduct or poor performance and treating whistleblowers
2 with respect and seriousness that they are entitled.

3 Last, but certainly not least, I am committed to
4 closing--closely overseeing the electronic health record
5 modernization. Greater information technology support
6 generally, and improved coordination between VA and DoD,
7 particularly, are a key to VA's future on every front.

8 Also, I know that the Chairman is very much committed
9 to this, is to work on our homeless veterans and suicide. I
10 know that is very near and dear to the Legion. I know that
11 is one of your top priorities. I commend Chairman Takano
12 for attaining the Technology and Modernization Subcommittee
13 that we established last Congress and I look forward to
14 significant work this Congress to address VA's technology
15 needs.

16 Commander Reistad, we should all be extremely proud of
17 the work that we have accomplished together in the last two
18 years. However, as you can see, we still have a lot of work
19 ahead of us. And I am glad that you and your fellow
20 Legionnaires are steadfast partners in that work, and thank
21 you once again for being with us here in Washington this
22 morning, and all the Legionnaires that are here. I look
23 forward to receiving your testimony and I yield back my
24 time.

25 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Ranking Member Roe.

1 Let me just say a few words about the Commander before
2 I introduce--before I accord him the time to give his
3 opening statement.

4 Brett P. Reistad was elected National Commander of the
5 American Legion on August 30, 2018, in Minneapolis, during
6 the organization's 100th national convention, and I was very
7 honored to actually be able to address that convention
8 myself, in Minneapolis.

9 He has been a member of the nation's largest veterans'
10 organization since 1981. He is former law enforcement. He
11 retired as a lieutenant with the Fairfax County Police
12 Department after 26 years of service--my goodness;
13 congratulations on that--and began a second career as a law
14 enforcement services coordinator for the Regional Organized
15 Crime Information Center of the Regional Information Sharing
16 Systems Program, a congressionally funded law enforcement
17 investigative assistance program.

18 The Commander's American Legion membership eligibility
19 is through his honorable Vietnam War-era service, from 1974
20 to 1978, as an active duty U.S. Army infantryman, where he
21 served with the Presidential Salute Battery of the 3rd U.S.
22 Infantry Regiment, the Old Guard, at historic Fort Myer,
23 Virginia. He participated in the inaugural ceremony for
24 President Carter and other high-profile ceremonies, and he
25 has since been honored as a Distinguished Member of The

1 Regiment.

2 Commander, we are very honored to have you here today,
3 and I now give you time to present your opening statement.

4 Oh, excuse me. Okay. Commander, we will need just to
5 hold off here. I made that introduction because I was not
6 anticipating that the gentleman from Louisiana would be here
7 to introduce you himself. So I want to make sure that I
8 accord him time.

9 Mr. Clay Higgins, the gentleman from Louisiana, you are
10 recognized to introduce the commander.

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1 STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE CLAY HIGGINS, A
2 REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF
3 LOUISIANA

4 Mr. Higgins. Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, thank
5 you for this gathering today. The commander I sit next to
6 is a great and humble servant of his nation, and by
7 extension all our fellow men. I thank him.

8 And, Mr. Chairman, as a former member of the House
9 Veterans' Affairs Committee it is my honor to join you this
10 morning and my great privilege to introduce our guest of
11 honor, the National Commander of the American Legion, Mr.
12 Brett P. Reistad.

13 I have had the opportunity to get to know Mr. Reistad
14 over the past few years, and as a fellow Army soldier and
15 law enforcement officer I was pleased to hear of his
16 election to the position of National Commander at the
17 American Legion's 100th annual convention last August.

18 Mr. Reistad is a patriot American of the highest order.
19 As a young man, he served his country with honor, and as an
20 infantryman in our nation was engaged in the Vietnam War, a
21 true servant of the people. Mr. Reistad stayed in uniform
22 after his Army service ended, becoming a police officer in
23 Fairfax County, Virginia, and retiring at the rank of
24 lieutenant after 26 years of service.

25 Mr. Reistad's service and dedication to our men and

1 women in uniform is evident in his exceptional leadership at
2 the American Legion. Having joined the organization in
3 1981, he rose to the ranks, serving at every level of the
4 American Legion, becoming commander of Post 270 in McLean,
5 Virginia, and eventually Department Commander for the
6 Commonwealth of Virginia in 2005, where membership reached
7 an all-time high.

8 He recently completed his second term as gubernatorial
9 appointee to the Commonwealth of Virginia's Joint Leadership
10 Council of Veteran Service Organizations, where he helped
11 coordinate the input of 23 VSOs in crafting legislation on
12 behalf of our veterans.

13 The American Legion is among the nation's largest
14 wartime veteran service organization, recognized as the
15 nation's largest wartime veteran service organization. With
16 12,806 posts in communities from sea to shining sea, members
17 advocate patriotism and honor and promote national security
18 and continued devotion to all those who served.

19 As the organization celebrates its centennial and storied
20 past, Mr. Reistad has emphasized the theme of celebrating
21 our legacy and remains committed to carrying out his duties
22 on behalf of our veterans, men and women in uniform, and
23 their families.

24 I am proud of the job he has done, excited to see what
25 he will continue to do, and proud to call him a friend.

1 [Applause.]

2 Chairman Takano. Commander, you are now recognized to

3 deliver--to present your opening statement.

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1 STATEMENT OF BRETT P. REISTAD, NATIONAL COMMANDER,
2 THE AMERICAN LEGION; ACCOMPANIED BY JOSEPH SHARPE,
3 DIRECTOR, VETERANS EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION
4 DIVISION; VINCENT TROIOLA, CHAIRMAN, VETERANS
5 EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION COMMISSION; MATTHEW
6 SHUMAN, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR; CHANIN
7 NUNTAVONG, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL VETERANS AFFAIRS AND
8 REHABILITATION DIVISION; RALPH BOZELLA, CHAIRMAN,
9 VETERANS AFFAIRS AND REHABILITATION COMMISSION;
10 AND RANDALL FISHER, CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE
11 COMMISSION

12 Mr. Reistad. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is great to
13 see all of you here.

14 Before I begin my opening statement I would first like
15 to introduce a few critical members of the American Legion
16 family. I ask the following people to please stand, if
17 able, and be recognized, the American Legion national
18 officers who were serving with me this year.

19 [Applause.]

20 Mr. Reistad. Our distinguished American Legion Past
21 National Commanders.

22 [Applause.]

23 Mr. Reistad. Kathy Dugan, president of the nation's
24 largest patriotic women's organization, the American Legion
25 Auxiliary.

1 [Applause.]

2 Mr. Reistad. Past national presidents of the American
3 Legion Auxiliary.

4 [Applause.]

5 Mr. Reistad. Greg Gibbs, National Commander of the
6 Sons of the American Legion.

7 [Applause.]

8 Mr. Reistad. Past National Commanders of the Sons of
9 the American Legion.

10 [Applause.]

11 Mr. Reistad. And for the rest of us, we are--
12 Multiple Speakers. --Team 100.

13 Mr. Reistad. Thank you.

14 [Applause.]

15 Mr. Reistad. Good morning, Chairman Takano, Chairman
16 Isakson, Ranking Members Tester and Roe, members of the
17 House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs, and
18 distinguished others among us. Thank you for the
19 opportunity to discuss the American Legion's legislative
20 priorities with you.

21 I also would like to thank Congressman Higgins, a
22 former member of this Committee, for his kind introduction,
23 for his military and law enforcement service, and for being
24 a member of the American Legion.

25 During the last Congress, these two committees played a

1 pivotal role in the passage of the most significant
2 veterans' health care legislation in many years, the VA
3 Mission Act. It was aptly titled. While there is still
4 much work to be done regarding implementation, let me tell
5 you about our mission.

6 Mission is a word that we take very seriously,
7 something that has been forged into us since our first day
8 of military training. It is an inner fortitude that tells
9 us that no matter what it takes, we will accomplish the task
10 at hand. It is synonymous with being a veteran. We have
11 seen this clearly demonstrated by the men and women of the
12 U.S. Coast Guard, who despite its stoppage of pay continued
13 to deploy more than 2,000 members a day at sea and ashore.
14 Yet they were treated differently than their DoD
15 counterparts. Pay uncertainty is difficult for everyone
16 impacted, but especially those who, by contract, are required
17 to continue working and risking their lives in an occupation
18 that provides, at best, modest pay.

19 The American Legion did not fall short of our mission
20 in January when, in just a two-week period, we provided more
21 than \$1 million of financial assistance to Coast Guard
22 families with young children.

23 [Applause.]

24 Mr. Reistad. It is times like this, Mr. Chairman, when
25 it is not about what we did but rather what we do. This is

1 where we hope Congress and the administration can live up to
2 its constitutionally mandated mission to support our
3 military. Whether it is through the Pay Our Coast Guard Act
4 or advanced appropriations for Coast Guard payroll, we
5 should all abide by the Semper Paratus motto, "Always
6 prepared."

7 Another special population that takes its mission
8 seriously is our nation's law enforcement officers. Last
9 year, 150 of these heroes died in the line of duty,
10 protecting and serving our communities. It is not
11 surprising that many military veterans continue to serve
12 their country through careers in law enforcement. Service
13 before self, even to the point of sacrificing one's life, if
14 necessary, is just one of the many commonalities shared
15 between military members and first responders.

16 From an epidemic of opioids to criminal gang activity
17 and domestic terrorism the life of a law enforcement officer
18 is fraught with danger. We ask Congress to always consider
19 how legislation impacts members of these special
20 communities.

21 Further, there are many constituencies that deserve our
22 support but none more so than Gold Star families. I am
23 proud to announce that the American Legion has recently
24 created a full-time staff position dedicated to advocating
25 for the needs of these families whose loss is immeasurable.

1 Again, Mr. Chairman, it is not about what we did but
2 rather what we do. President Lincoln referred to this loss
3 as, "so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom." And
4 perhaps nothing is more important than preventing the number
5 of Gold Star families from growing.

6 That said, not all of America's war casualties come
7 from enemy bullets. In 2017, the VA reported that the
8 suicide rate among 18- to 24-year-old male Iraq or
9 Afghanistan U.S. war veterans had risen fivefold. For 18-
10 to 29-year-old female veterans the suicide rate doubled. We
11 also know that PTSD, TBI, and feelings of a loss of purpose
12 or belonging are frequently found among those who attempt
13 such tragic and permanent endings.

14 These feelings and conditions are either preventable or
15 treatable. It must be the mission of every Legionnaire,
16 every veteran, every employee of the DoD and VA, and I might
17 add every Member of Congress, to stop such national
18 tragedies. Simply put, access to timely treatment and
19 quality health care saves lives.

20 In 2017, the American Legion commissioned a report that
21 confirmed what we already suspected. VA performs as well or
22 better than its private sector counterparts in areas such as
23 patient safety, patient satisfaction, care coordination, and
24 innovative medical practices. But we do recognize that
25 geography and specialty care sometimes means the VA is not

1 always the best option for patients. We support the
2 administration's recent announcement that access to
3 veterans' health care providers should be based on actual
4 drive times as opposed to straight-line mileage. Moreover,
5 we agree that veterans should not have to wait more than 20
6 days for primary care or 28 days for specialty care. The
7 American Legion does not oppose Choice but we adamantly
8 oppose any plan that would gut the best health care system
9 in the country.

10 The central fact remains that nobody understands the
11 unique health care needs of the veteran population better
12 than the professionals at the VA. Further, the VA Mission
13 Act must live up to its mission of serving veterans as
14 opposed to serving private health care providers.

15 To varying degrees, anyone who has personally assisted
16 a close family member through sickness or serious medical
17 conditions understands the challenges facing caregivers. I
18 know. I, too, have experienced this. We welcome the recent
19 expansion of the VA Family Caregiver Program to equalize
20 benefits so that family members providing care for Vietnam
21 and other veterans are on par with those who provide it for
22 members of the post-9/11 generation.

23 However, gaps still exist. Regardless of when a
24 veteran served, even if it was during a period of peace,
25 caregivers still face the same challenges. They sacrifice

1 career, time with others, and often their own health care
2 needs to care for their loved one. The American Legion has
3 always believed that a veteran is a veteran. Our gratitude
4 for their service should not be measured by arbitrary date
5 but rather by the simple fact that they swore an oath to
6 defend our nation. It is time that loved ones who are
7 providing care for their veterans achieve equality.

8 And there is another area of equality that the American
9 Legion would like to see addressed. A century ago, our
10 organization was chartered by Congress to serve as the
11 leading voice for the veterans of the Great War. The
12 thinking at the time was that World War I was so horrendous,
13 that it was the war to end all wars. As we all know,
14 history proved that it was not. Even so, our charter was
15 updated during World War II to reflect the service and
16 sacrifice of that era.

17 Subsequently, our charter and membership eligibility
18 have mirrored the eras officially recognized by the U.S.
19 government to include the wars and conflicts such as Korea,
20 Vietnam, and the global war on terror. However, these
21 recognized periods fail to take into account the hostilities
22 that occur between official eras in which nearly 1,600 U.S.
23 military personnel were either killed or wounded, in places
24 like Cuba, Iran, and El Salvador.

25 Because of these frequent engagements, the American

1 Legion calls on Congress to declare what has demonstrably
2 already occurred, that the United States has been
3 continually engaged in a state of war from December 7, 1941,
4 until such a date in the future that our government may
5 declare an end to all armed hostilities.

6 Congress can provide this recognition by supporting and
7 passing Senate Bill 504, or the Legion Act. The Legion Act
8 will authorize the American Legion to expand our membership
9 eligibility requirements. We sincerely thank Senator
10 Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona for making this the first bill she
11 introduced as a member of the United States Senate. We also
12 thank Senator Thom Tillis of North Carolina for joining
13 Senator Sinema in introducing this bipartisan legislation.
14 The veterans that the Legion Act will recognize have carried
15 out their missions. Now it is our turn.

16 In 16 days, the American Legion will officially turn
17 100 years old. You have heard me discuss mission quite a
18 bit this morning. That is because the founders of our
19 organization had a post-war mission. Their mission, one
20 that continues today, was to care for veterans, provide
21 patriotic youth programs, advocate for a strong national
22 defense, and instill pride about what it means to be
23 American. It is not just what the American Legion did. It
24 is what we do.

25 It is tempting to say "mission accomplished," but that

1 implies that our work is done. It is not. So I prefer to
2 say "mission still being accomplished" and I invite all
3 Members of Congress to join us in a mission to make a better
4 America.

5 Chairman Takano, Chairman Isakson, Ranking Members
6 Tester and Roe, and members of the critical committees,
7 thank you for holding this hearing, thank you for all that
8 you do for our nation's veterans and families, and thanks
9 also to your amazing and talented staff.

10 Mr. Chairman, I would happily answer any questions you
11 may have, but I would like to let you know that I am blessed
12 to have sitting with me some subject matter experts who are
13 available, and in the event that they can answer a question
14 better than I can I will defer to them, with your
15 permission.

16 [The prepared statement of Mr. Reistad follows:]

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1 Chairman Takano. Thank you.

2 [Applause.]

3 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Commander, for your
4 testimony. We will now begin with questions from the
5 Chairman and then Ranking Members and then members from the
6 Committee in the order of arrival.

7 I would like to begin by recognizing my colleague from
8 the Senate, Chairman Isakson, for five minutes.

9 Chairman Isakson. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I
10 appreciate the opportunity and I again want to thank the
11 Legion for the Fireside Chat that we did on Monday, which
12 was so effective of a way for us to communicate and get to
13 talk to so many of your members. Congratulations again on
14 your 100th anniversary. And for my benefit and my humoring,
15 all the Georgia Legionnaires please stand.

16 [Applause.]

17 Chairman Isakson. We are all on the same team and we
18 are all in the same rank when it comes to being Americans
19 and to being Legionnaires and to being veterans of the
20 United States military, but we are always glad to have the
21 Georgia veterans here. Congratulations on being here today.

22 I only have one--I am not going to ask a big question.
23 I am going to kind of make more of a statement because I
24 think it is important that I repeat myself in the remarks I
25 made first of all.

1 Commander, do you have a successor here? Do you all
2 have a line of succession for commanders?

3 Mr. Reistad. Sir, we do have candidates that are
4 following. So there is a leading candidate for National
5 Commander that is behind me.

6 Chairman Isakson. Is there a leading candidate--who is
7 that person?

8 Mr. Reistad. That person can stand. It is Bill Oxford
9 of North Carolina.

10 Chairman Isakson. Good.

11 [Applause.]

12 Chairman Isakson. I want to tell you why I am doing
13 this. This is really important. Mr. Oxford, and to
14 yourself, Commander, your terms are two years or one?

15 Mr. Reistad. One year, sir.

16 Chairman Isakson. Over the next 24 months the future
17 of the VA's health care services and operation depends on
18 our supporting the changes in the Mission Act, the
19 implementation of the Mission Act, and holding everyone
20 accountable, us, in Congress, the physicians and nurses and
21 assistants in the VA, and the VA administration itself.

22 So I want to tell everybody in a leadership position,
23 either on these committees or in your organization, the
24 Legion, nothing we have done is going to work unless you
25 help us make it work. We are going to have to give the VA

1 some time and some latitude to make a few mistakes. But as
2 long as they are making mistakes of the heart, making
3 mistakes trying to do better, that is fine. But when they
4 make mistakes we want to call them out, have them correct
5 them, and then support them for the changes they made.

6 I fear sometimes that bureaucracies wait for elected
7 officials' terms to expire. So, in other words, once I am
8 in office, I am in office for six years, as a Senator. When
9 they go to work for the VA, unless they do something really
10 bad, they are there for life. So they can outwait me. I do
11 not want that to happen. We cannot afford to spend a day
12 waiting for the promise of the improved appeals process,
13 accountability process, positions of the numbers sufficient
14 to have VA health care reach every veteran in the country.
15 We need all these things to become reality and not just
16 promises.

17 I am pledging my part to support that. I know the
18 members of the Committees will pledge that. And if you, Mr.
19 Oxford, and you, Commander, will see that starts in the
20 chain of command in your organizations, a few years from now
21 we will look back on this being one of the great times of
22 all for the VA and for veterans in America.

23 Thank you all for your service.

24 [Applause.]

25 Mr. Reistad. Thank you, sir.

1 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Senator Isakson. I will--
2 both Senator Tester and I will take our question time later.
3 But I want to now move to recognize a member of the House
4 Committee, Mr. Cisneros of California, who himself is a Navy
5 veteran.

6 Mr. Cisneros, you are recognized for five minutes.

7 Mr. Cisneros. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Commander
8 Reistad, thank you, and all of you, thank you for being here
9 today. I especially want to thank the members from
10 California who have made that long cross-country trip,
11 especially I understand I have two members from my district,
12 Martha Huff and Robert Brower, who are here representing
13 California's 39th. So thank you all for being here today.

14 I am a proud member of the American Legion Post 277 in
15 Placentia. In fact, this hearing today is actually
16 reminding me that I have to pay my dues this year.

17 [Laughter.]

18 Mr. Cisneros. So thank you for doing that.

19 But I am also the grandson of veterans, the son of
20 veterans, and as the Chairman said, a Navy veteran myself.
21 And I understand the importance that the VA plays serving
22 veterans. My father is a veteran, a Vietnam veteran, who is
23 suffering from the side effects of Agent Orange, and I hope
24 one day his Navy counterparts will be able to get the same
25 treatment that he is receiving from the VA right now.

1 [Applause.]

2 Mr. Cisneros. But it is also--the important thing for
3 me that I worry about is the transition of our
4 servicemembers out of the military into the VA. My father
5 also went over 30 years without being diagnosed that he was
6 suffering from PTSD, and I do not want that to happen again
7 to our current veterans that are serving in the service.

8 So how, Commander Reistad and any of you, how can
9 Congress support the VA as to make sure that we get a smooth
10 transition from those that are leaving the military active
11 duty service, that they are transitioning and making sure
12 that they are getting the medical attention that they need
13 and deserve in the VA, once they leave service?

14 Mr. Reistad. Well, Congressman, thank you first for
15 your question and for your service to our country. I
16 believe it is essential that our military services promote
17 transition at the end of a person's service, and I would
18 like to ask our Director of Veterans Affairs and
19 Rehabilitation to respond to your question please.

20 Mr. Nuntavong. Congressman, thank you for your
21 question. I served 22 years as a Marine, and I saw the
22 great care that our active duty folks get while they are
23 serving in the military. What we hope is that they continue
24 to get that great care through the VA. Nine million
25 servicemembers or veterans are enrolled in VA. We have 20

1 million veterans out there. We need to get them enrolled in
2 VA.

3 So what you can do to help us, to help our veterans, is
4 to get them. VA care is the best care. Our members, our
5 veterans prefer VA care over local care, and we believe that
6 if we get them into the VA system that they will get that
7 continued care that they deserve.

8 Mr. Cisneros. Thank you. So the other question I have
9 is how we can be supportive. VSOs, veterans' organizations
10 like yourselves, the American Legion, and other
11 organizations are out there. How can Congress be supportive
12 in helping to grow your membership, to make sure that you
13 have advocate that, continuing going on into the future they
14 will be advocating for our veterans into the future?

15 Mr. Reistad. I mentioned in my testimony, sir, the
16 bill that we refer to as the Legion Act. It is currently
17 Senate Bill 504. Hopefully we will see the same in the
18 House of Representatives. That will enable us to be able to
19 grow our membership.

20 I think the American Legion is challenged in the coming
21 years to grow, but we have great programs and great people
22 in our organizations and I am very fortunate to know many
23 younger veterans that are getting involved in our
24 organization and moving up the ranks and promoting our
25 organization to their colleagues, families, and friends.

1 And I believe that we will have another 100 years of strong
2 service to our country ahead of us.

3 But I would like to ask our legislative director,
4 Matthew Shuman, to elaborate please.

5 Mr. Shuman. Thank you, Commander, and thank you,
6 Congressman, for the question, and thank you for your
7 service, with the time we have left. I would agree, we are
8 certainly looking for a member of the House of
9 Representatives to introduce the House version of the Legion
10 Act, and I am happy to chat with you after this hearing to
11 see if we can make that work.

12 Mr. Cisneros. And I would be happy to do that.

13 I just want to thank you all again for your service to
14 our country and thank you all for being here today.

15 Mr. Reistad. Thank you for your question, sir.

16 [Applause.]

17 Chairman Takano. The gentleman yields back. I know
18 recognize Senator Tillis of North Carolina for five minutes.

19 Mr. Tillis. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you all
20 for being here. I guess I have start--I already heard--did
21 I hear somebody mention somebody from North Carolina is
22 coming up in leadership somewhere? Do we have any other
23 folks from North Carolina here?

24 [Applause.]

25 Senator Tillis. There you go. Well, good morning.

1 I want to cover a couple of things that I covered
2 yesterday in the DAV meeting, because I think that you all
3 are a very important part of us getting the Mission Act
4 implementation right. One thing that is very important to
5 me is that you all understand that Ranking Member Tester and
6 I, with the encouragement of the Chair Isakson, have been
7 meeting with the VA, literally, for about every six weeks
8 since I have been here, to try to figure out what they are
9 doing, what they are addressing as they have implemented new
10 programs.

11 So as we are moving forward we are always looking
12 forward to your input on things that we should cover and
13 progress, any concerns, and then again, conveying
14 information that we get from those meetings to you all is
15 very important. The Director does a good job of staying in
16 touch with our office. In fact, we ran into each other on
17 the sidewalk today. But he is always walking the halls here
18 and doing a good job.

19 So we just need your feedback, in a very constructive
20 way, because I think--I believe the VA is moving in the
21 right direction. We actually have a Secretary of the VA who
22 I have a little bit of history with, who is also from North
23 Carolina. He is the son of a gravely wounded combat veteran
24 from the Vietnam War, and I think that he gets it. He has
25 got a big organization to run so I am sure constructive

1 feedback from everybody, particularly you guys, would be
2 welcome.

3 I will tell you a funny story that I had yesterday,
4 because it relates to the implementation and what the VA
5 looks like, say, 20 years from now. Senator Sullivan, who
6 is a Marine, and I are good friends. He is from Alaska. We
7 were, I think, at dinner one night and he told me, he said,
8 "Thom, do you know that Alaska has more veterans per capita
9 than any other state?" And I said, "Dan, do you know that
10 North Carolina has got more veterans than you have got
11 people?"

12 [Laughter.]

13 Senator Tillis. And the reason I tell that story was,
14 one, I was jabbing a buddy of mine, but the other reason was
15 to explain the vast differences and challenges we have from
16 state to state. We need a brick-and-mortar presence and we
17 need, as the Commander said, one of the greatest medical
18 systems to continue to operate, in the mode that it operates
19 today.

20 But then again, we have also got to look at the unique
21 challenges of a veteran who is in western North Carolina
22 that may be 40, 50 miles away from a health care provider,
23 and there are winding roads up in the mountains, or a
24 veteran who is in Alaska, in the far reaches. So we have
25 got to figure out what fits for those states and have the

1 flexibility to do that.

2 But I do not believe--I always say in these meetings,
3 anybody that says this is the year and this is the Congress
4 where everybody is going to move to privatization, I do not
5 get it. I do not believe anybody in their right mind is
6 going to do that. But what we are going to do is make sure
7 that when you have a need that you get quality health care,
8 and we want to give you every single option that we can to
9 get it as quickly as possible. And I believe that is at the
10 heart of what Secretary Wilkie and the VA are trying to do.

11 Also, I am glad to hear that Congressman Cisneros is
12 interested in trying to figure out how we increase your
13 legions, because I am kind of interested in that too. That
14 is what Senator Sinema and I have sponsored, Senate 504, the
15 Legion Act, and we look forward to getting our colleagues in
16 the House to get on board with it. I think it makes sense
17 and we are happy to see that get to the President's desk.

18 And then, finally, I want to talk about the unique
19 position I am on. I have got a personnel subcommittee later
20 today in Senate Armed Services, and I also agree with
21 Congressman Cisneros. We have got to figure out a better
22 way to connect the dots through transition, and we have got
23 to find out a better way to identify what we consider to be
24 traumatic events, maybe not rising to a level of being
25 recognized, but the cumulative effects of concussions and

1 other sorts of injuries that could ultimately have an effect
2 on someone's behavior who served admirably until something
3 clicked, and now they are discharged with bad paper.

4 We have got to figure out a way how to actually deal
5 with that in a fair and just manner. And I think that
6 begins by spending a lot more time over the lifecycle of the
7 active duty reservist, National Guard, to make sure that we
8 really understand what may have happened to cause that sad
9 outcome, to give them the care that they deserve, because
10 they also are disproportionately high on the suicide list
11 and we have got to change that.

12 So I am not going to ask you all any questions but to
13 say I appreciate you all being here today. The Director
14 does a good job. I think the best meetings are the meetings
15 that we have in our office so we can get back and get into
16 the weeds with it, and I welcome you in my office every
17 time. And next year, if you are stuck in a long line out at
18 the sidewalk, trying to get through, if you come to the
19 Dirksen entrance over here on the first floor, I will give
20 you a big pass and make the Capitol police a little bit
21 nervous. We let about 30 or 40 in a day.

22 [Laughter.]

23 Senator Tillis. Kind of shortens the line. Thank you
24 all for being here. God bless you and thank you for your
25 service.

1 [Applause.]

2 Mr. Reistad. Thank you very much, Senator.

3 Chairman Takano. The Senator yields back. I now
4 recognize a new member of Congress, the gentlewoman from
5 Illinois who brings a tremendous background of nursing and
6 public health policy knowledge to this Committee, Ms.
7 Underwood from the state of Illinois. You are recognized
8 for five minutes.

9 Ms. Underwood. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you,
10 Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Tester and Ranking Member
11 Roe for organizing this important presentation from the
12 American Legion. I also want to thank Commander Reistad and
13 the Legion for being here and your presentation today,
14 because of your invaluable insight and guidance that you
15 provide into solving the challenges that our veterans face,
16 and their families experience across our nation.

17 So since we are doing some shout-outs, are there some
18 Illinois veterans here today?

19 [Cheers.]

20 Ms. Underwood. Oh yes. Thank you so much. It is so
21 good to see you. And thank you for your continued service.
22 I look forward to learning from all of you today and hope to
23 meet with you in the days and months to come.

24 I represent a community in northern Illinois outside of
25 Chicago, the Illinois 14th, and in our community we have

1 36,000 veterans, 2,300 of whom are female veterans. And
2 women veterans now comprise about 10 percent of the total
3 veteran population and those numbers are expected to grow in
4 the coming years.

5 And so my question, really, is in the Legion's view,
6 what does the VA need to be doing to ensure that female
7 veterans are receiving the care that they need?

8 Mr. Reistad. Well, thank you, Congresswoman, for your
9 question and thank you for being so gracious this morning to
10 let me tell you, I thought you were from Michigan.

11 Ms. Underwood. That is okay. I went to Michigan,
12 though.

13 Mr. Reistad. But I will say this. I got wrong
14 information, but I did live in Illinois as well. So I
15 appreciate your representation of Illinois.

16 And to give you a little bit of background, you know,
17 our focus with women veterans is to ensure that they get the
18 equality of services that they deserve. As I mentioned in
19 my testimony, we are of the belief that a veteran is a
20 veteran, and our female veterans deserve only the best
21 quality care. And this would include gender-specific
22 medical resources, mammography, gynecology, private
23 treatment and exam areas, education and enrollment of more
24 women veterans, and improvement of our outreach to them.

25 And I would like to ask our Director of Veterans

1 Affairs and Rehabilitation, Mr. Nuntavong, to respond
2 further to your question.

3 Mr. Nuntavong. Thank you, Commander. Congresswoman,
4 the largest-growing population of veterans is the women's
5 population and it is important that they receive the gender-
6 specific care, as the Commander mentioned, that they
7 deserve. But we hope that you can encourage VA to provide
8 child care services in VA facilities and help VA find access
9 to privacy needs that women veterans need as they come into
10 medical facilities.

11 Ms. Underwood. Thank you. And did you have any non-
12 health care related issues that you wanted to just highlight
13 related to the female veterans and any specific issues that
14 we should be working on here in the Congress?

15 Mr. Shuman. Yes, Congresswoman. Thank you for that.
16 I think we need to do a better job of ensuring all veterans
17 get better access to VA, but, in particular, female
18 veterans. As you stated, this is the fastest-growing
19 demographic and we need to certainly take care of our female
20 veterans.

21 I also certainly want to thank Congresswoman Brownley
22 and Chairman Takano for creating a new staff position that
23 will take care of this.

24 Ms. Underwood. Excellent. And I would also like to
25 commend Congresswoman Brownley for her excellent leadership

1 in passing this important child care bill.

2 My next question is about the advancement of medical
3 care, particularly related to the traumatic brain injuries
4 and the post-traumatic stress disorder to diagnoses that
5 have become signature injuries from the global war on
6 terror. Your organization has been studying these injuries
7 for nearly a decade, and can you share any key policy
8 recommendations that you have--I know you mentioned it, sir,
9 a little bit, in your opening comments--on TBIs and PTSD
10 that you would hope that the Congress can support your
11 efforts in?

12 Mr. Reistad. I would like to ask our Chairman, Ralph
13 Bozella, of our Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation
14 Commission to respond to your question, Congresswoman.

15 Mr. Bozella. Thank you, Commander. Thank you,
16 Congresswoman. That is a very important issue, certainly,
17 for all veterans, certainly including women veterans. And
18 one of the reasons for the mental health issues deals with
19 the MST, TBI, PTSD, all the pressure that go with returning
20 from a combat situation.

21 In the American Legion, we have a TBI PTSD committee.
22 We are studying the issues. We have some publications on
23 the issues, a booklet called "The War Within and the Road
24 Home" and we would be glad to share that information with
25 you as well as a white paper on suicide prevention.

1 Although suicide prevention is a problem we talk about
2 at the national level, it is a personal level, a family
3 issue, a community issue, and I think all of us--Congress,
4 the American Legion, VA--need to figure out how do we get
5 this national issue down to that community level. That is
6 where the work needs to be done. Thank you.

7 Ms. Underwood. Thank you so much, and I yield back my
8 time.

9 Chairman Takano. The gentlewoman yields back. I would
10 now like to recognize, for five minutes, the gentleman from
11 Michigan, a former Marine lieutenant general, helicopter
12 pilot in the Vietnam War, General Bergman, you are
13 recognized for five minutes.

14 Mr. Bergman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. In Marine terms
15 that introduction is getting a little long.

16 [Laughter.]

17 Mr. Bergman. But that is another way of saying the
18 Chairman is acknowledging that I probably, as a young second
19 lieutenant flying infantry around Vietnam, I probably earned
20 every one of these white hairs. So, you know, there was a
21 mutual admiration society between the helicopter pilots and
22 the grunts. They thought we were crazy for flying them. We
23 thought they were crazy for getting out.

24 So anyway, I would like to ask--this is kind of a
25 generic, you know, question. I am a member of the Legion

1 post in Watersmeet, Michigan, a life member, and I am
2 curious--this is kind of off the subject matter but yet it
3 is very germane when you start talking about veterans and
4 isolation after their service and where they go and reside.
5 It is one thing to be in a big city and another thing to be
6 in a very rural community.

7 How is the Legion doing as far as propagating your
8 membership on your rolls, not necessarily the folks who come
9 to the Legion, you know, the Legion hall or whatever, these
10 days, because the younger generations do differently. What
11 is your plan to make sure those young veterans see the value
12 in the Legion and get involved?

13 Mr. Reistad. Well, thank you very much for your
14 question. Mr. Chairman, our efforts to reach out to young
15 veterans involve our own young veterans reaching out to them
16 directly, and to speaking to them about what the American
17 Legion brings to the table to benefit them in their life and
18 provides them with resources and programs that might benefit
19 them. Camaraderie is very high on the list, but the
20 American Legion has programs in four pillars, which include
21 veterans affairs and rehabilitation, it includes our
22 children and youth and their children.

23 Mr. Bergman. Are you still doing Legion baseball?

24 Mr. Reistad. Legion baseball is part of that program,
25 the children and youth, correct.

1 Mr. Bergman. Has there been any talk about expanding,
2 because I know baseball has always been a great sport. But
3 has there been any talk within the Legion of expanding it to
4 things like maybe soccer or lacrosse or anything? Again, I
5 am looking at--we have got eight grandkids, 17 down to 10--

6 Mr. Reistad. Understood.

7 Mr. Bergman. --and we look at their involvement. And
8 the beauty of what the Legion and the leadership does with--
9 as a young 16-year-old, I mean, had the--I was the
10 benefactor of some guidance by some Korean War vets and some
11 World War II vets. It was a little direct guidance, but--

12 Mr. Reistad. Yes, sir. Mr. Chairman, for the last six
13 months I have had the opportunity to present this
14 organization and travel nationally, and one of the great
15 things that I get to do in my travels is meet with the local
16 American Legion posts. And it allows me to compare from one
17 to the next and from one state to the next the different
18 programs that we have. And it is not unusual at all for me
19 to go an American Legion post that sponsors sports outside
20 of American Legion baseball--little leagues, soccer leagues
21 and such.

22 But also the beauty of our organization is that the
23 posts are autonomous, which means they are given the breadth
24 to be able to create their own programs.

25 Mr. Bergman. I do not want to cut you off here because

1 I appreciate your answer. And the autonomy of the posts--
2 because what we might do in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan
3 may be different than what someone might do in downtown
4 Dallas.

5 Mr. Reistad. Right.

6 Mr. Bergman. Whatever it happens to be.

7 And I apologize if someone has already asked this
8 question but I want to go--it goes back to the isolation in
9 rural areas, the subject of--I would like to hear your
10 thoughts on telehealth when it comes to delivery of health
11 care, whether it be physical, psychological, whatever it
12 happens to be. Any thoughts from a Legion perspective on
13 where we are in telehealth and where we need to go?

14 Mr. Reistad. Yes, sir. I have had the benefit of
15 actually seeing the telehealth program personally out of the
16 Minneapolis Veterans Affairs Medical Center, and it is truly
17 a phenomenal program. And I have seen it also from the
18 hospital room and how it functions.

19 But I would like to ask our Chairman, Ralph Bozella, to
20 respond in more detail to you regarding your question.

21 Mr. Bozella. Thank you, Commander. Mr. Bergman, I am
22 one of those grunts you used to drop off in Vietnam. Yes,
23 we did get out of those birds.

24 And the telehealth program we are finding is an
25 excellent tool to be used, obviously, to cut distance for

1 cert examinations, primary care, mental health treatment,
2 actually, in mental health, general examinations, and other
3 more specific things. They are using telehealth centers,
4 much easier to build, much less expensive to run, with a
5 nurse practitioner or a PA and then connected to a provider,
6 you know, hours away. So it works well and we think it is a
7 great program. We want to continue to see the development
8 of that program.

9 Mr. Bergman. Thank you. And, Mr. Chairman, I
10 apologize for going over my time but I yield back.

11 Chairman Takano. The gentleman yields back. I would
12 now like to recognize my fellow Californian and Chair of our
13 Economic Opportunity Subcommittee, Mr. Levin, for five
14 minutes.

15 Mr. Levin. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am so grateful
16 for the opportunity to be here today and so grateful to all
17 of you for everything you have done for our country. And
18 thank you, Commander, in particular.

19 I take my new responsibility as Chair of the
20 subcommittee, House Veterans' Affairs Committee on Economic
21 Opportunity extremely seriously, at a time of rancor and
22 partisanship in our country. This subcommittee and the
23 greater work of the Veterans' Affairs Committee provides us
24 the great opportunity to get things done on a bipartisan
25 basis, and I am very grateful to be able to work with you

1 and your team in the months and years ahead.

2 My district is in Orange and San Diego counties. Right
3 in the middle we have got the amazing Marine Corps base,
4 Camp Pendleton. It is an absolutely essential part of our
5 district, and many who serve at Camp Pendleton really like
6 the weather and decide to come back, so we have one of the
7 largest veteran populations in the entire United States.
8 And there are a lot of our veterans who are instrumental
9 members of our cities, of our communities. There are others
10 who need help as they transition to civilian life after
11 their service.

12 And my district has a lot of exceptional organizations
13 doing that work. I think in many ways we are a standard for
14 what can be achieved when we see our veterans as part of an
15 integrated whole for our communities and our economy.

16 I hope that together we can make progress on all sorts
17 of opportunities for veterans--the GI Bill, issues around
18 vocational rehabilitation, homelessness, home loans, and a
19 lot more. And with that in mind I just had a couple of
20 questions for you.

21 I am concerned, and one of the things I hear a lot from
22 our local veterans is the targeting of servicemembers and
23 their families by for-profit schools, specifically
24 incentivized by the 90/10 loophole that does not count GI
25 Bill payments as federal payments but rather has them count

1 towards the 10 percent of funds that for-profit schools need
2 to receive as non-federal payments. This can and has led to
3 for-profit schools pushing for enrollment of students
4 veterans to the GI Bill but not providing the quality
5 education those student veterans need and deserve to success
6 in their transition from military to civilian life.

7 So, Commander, has your organization seen these or
8 similar issues and do you support the closing of the 90/10
9 loophole?

10 Mr. Reistad. Thank you for your question. I would
11 like to defer your question to one of our experts here at
12 the table, and that would be Chairman Troiola of our
13 Veterans Employment and Education Commission.

14 Mr. Troiola. Thank you, Congressman Levin, for your
15 question. I am pleased that you asked that question. We,
16 right now at the American Legion, have a resolution in place
17 to close the loophole for the 90/10 discrepancy. The
18 American Legion looks forward to working with you to try and
19 close that loophole.

20 Mr. Levin. Fantastic. And, you know, obviously we are
21 also concerned about some of the issues surrounding the
22 implementation of some of the provisions in the Forever GI
23 Bill last fall, and will be following the implementation
24 this year very closely.

25 I am focused on the underlying problems that created

1 the situation, specifically the aging information technology
2 infrastructure in the Veterans Benefits Administration, the
3 poor communication, at times, between the Office of
4 Information and Technology and the business line customer,
5 which resulted in inaccurate contract requirements that did
6 not accomplish what was needed to implement Sections 107 and
7 501 of the Forever GI Bill.

8 My question for you, Commander, is do you have any
9 recommendations on what our subcommittee, the Economic
10 Opportunity Subcommittee, should focus on as we ask the VA
11 for its plan to modernize the Veterans Benefits
12 Administration's IT systems?

13 Mr. Reistad. Yes, sir. With your permission I would
14 like to ask our Chairman, our Director of Legislation, Matt
15 Shuman, to please respond.

16 Mr. Shuman. Thank you for that question, Congressman.
17 I think it is incredibly important for the Colmery GI Bill,
18 which was named after the American Legion Past National
19 Commander who wrote the original GI Bill, to be implemented
20 correctly. That is certainly the intent of both of these
21 committees.

22 Focusing on the IT side of things, which is where we
23 believe the errors took place, is absolutely critical. I
24 think we need to focus and make sure that the new IT systems
25 are implemented and that there is one system that works

1 instead of hopping between multiple systems to be able to
2 process the GI Bill benefit.

3 Mr. Levin. Terrific. Well, I am really excited to be
4 working with you and look forward to subsequent discussions
5 and I am very grateful to you all for your service. Thank
6 you so much.

7 Mr. Reistad. Thank you for your question, sir.

8 [Applause.]

9 Chairman Takano. The gentleman yields back. I would
10 now like to recognize the gentleman from Alabama, Mr.
11 Sullivan, for five minutes.

12 Senator Sullivan. Mr. Chairman--

13 Chairman Takano. I am sorry. Alaska.

14 Senator Sullivan. --so, Mr. Chairman, I am going to
15 ask a little bit about--any of my fellow veterans from
16 Alaska here, can you raise your hand? How about a round of
17 applause. Now these guys--I know Senator Tillis, my
18 colleague from North Carolina, was here a little bit
19 earlier, talking about size and numbers. So, look, I will
20 just be honest. My fellow Senators get a little nervous
21 when I broach the subject of size, being a Senator from
22 Alaska. So my fellow Alaskans flew about 5,000 miles to get
23 here so I appreciate that. And we do have more vets per
24 capita than any state in the country, which I am also very
25 proud of, but I think it makes guys like Senator Tillis

1 nervous so I will not talk about the fact that Alaska is
2 actually 13 times larger than the state of North Carolina.

3 [Laughter.]

4 Senator Sullivan. So for you North Carolinians here, I
5 am sorry, but you can send that back to your Senator.

6 And General, I appreciate your comments. Being a grunt
7 myself in the Marines, not a Vietnam vet, but somebody who
8 has been taken around by a lot of our amazing pilots. I
9 want to thank you for your service, and all of our Vietnam
10 veterans, because they have done such a great job, and so we
11 want to thank you.

12 [Applause.]

13 Senator Sullivan. But I wanted to touch, Commander, on
14 this topic that I think we are all--we all care quite a lot
15 about. Actually, it was the first bill I co-sponsored as
16 U.S. Senator four years ago, the Clay Hunt Suicide
17 Prevention Act, which was named after a Marine who,
18 unfortunately, took his life.

19 What, in your view, are we doing in terms of suicide
20 prevention programs that is positive, and then where are we
21 still falling short? Senator Blumenthal and I are
22 introducing the Reach Every Veteran in Crisis Act today,
23 which, again, looks at filling some of the gaps as it
24 relates to suicide. But can you expound upon what more we
25 should be doing?

1 Mr. Reistad. Yes, sir. Thank you for your question.
2 We are trying to promote the enhancement of outreach and
3 awareness to our veterans, not only externally but also
4 within the VA. We want to promote the education of signs of
5 potential suicide, and to promote the resources that are
6 available so we can refer those at risk to the appropriate
7 places to get health assistance and mental health
8 assistance.

9 Expanding and promoting mental health care treatment
10 and increasing staffing for the VA's Integrative Health and
11 Wellness Program. And I would like to ask Chairman Bozella
12 if he can add to that list.

13 Mr. Bozella. Thank you, Commander. Senator Sullivan,
14 this is a problem that everybody has the greatest concern
15 about. This is certainly the top of our list at the
16 American Legion too. And earlier there was a discussion
17 here about the 14 veterans a day out of the 20 that commit
18 suicide, those 14 who are not even connected to VA.

19 Senator Sullivan. Yeah. Yeah.

20 Mr. Bozella. You know that some of those veterans, the
21 reason they are not connected to the VA, they are reserve
22 and guardists. They do not have the benefit, or other
23 veterans that may not be eligible for the benefit of mental
24 health through VA vet centers and so on. So that is one.

25 We have to look at why do people commit suicide.

1 Mental health issues, certainly, a loss of purpose, a loss
2 of a sense of belonging, and that is where VSOs can
3 certainly help with that. We have to get this, as I said
4 earlier, to that community level. I think one of the ways
5 we can do that is through American Legion and VSO post
6 homes.

7 There is the initiative out there right now, the
8 Governor's Challenge, seven pilot states. I know Montana,
9 Colorado, Kansas, and Texas are among those. And that
10 effort is to get VA to train people. How do we recognize
11 someone is at risk? How do we then connect them to a VA
12 service? So we are working closely with that. I personally
13 will be involved with that in Colorado, and I am looking
14 forward to working on an effort that will bring it locally.

15 Senator Sullivan. Great. Well, listen, you know, I
16 like to brag about my state with regard to our veteran
17 population, but we also, like a lot of states, like a lot of
18 big rural states, have a big suicide problem in Alaska. And
19 so I would be honored if all of you gentlemen could take a
20 look at our Reach Every Veteran in Crisis Act that we are
21 introducing today and just give us your view and thoughts on
22 what you think is good in it, what you think needs to be
23 improved in it.

24 But we can always improve on this issue, and it is
25 heartbreaking issue. And no American wants this to happen

1 and I appreciate the VSOs for all your attention to it, and
2 I think you see here a lot of bipartisan support for
3 addressing this challenge, which we have got to do better
4 at.

5 So thank you, Mr. Chairman.

6 [Applause.]

7 Chairman Takano. The Senator yields back, and I wanted
8 to acknowledge the Senator's service to our country, his
9 military service. So thank you, Senator.

10 I would now like to recognize my fellow Californian and
11 chair of our subcommittee on health and chair of our new
12 Women's Veterans Task Force, Ms. Brownley, of California.
13 You are recognized for five minutes.

14 Ms. Brownley. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I want to
15 add my voice to welcoming all of the California Legionnaires
16 who are here today. And, Commander, I want to thank you for
17 your leadership, all your past commanders, the American
18 Legion Auxiliary, thank you for your leadership and the
19 leadership, really, quite frankly, throughout the country
20 that the American Legion does for serving our veterans
21 across the country.

22 And I certainly appreciate, Commander, when you talked
23 about your mission that we cannot say "mission accomplished"
24 but perhaps "mission still being accomplished." Because I
25 think we have accomplished a lot but we still have a lot of

1 work to do, and I think it is important that we need to do
2 more than simply thank you for your service. We need to
3 ensure that we are servicing every single veteran
4 appropriately and positively across our country.

5 And I am very excited, and I am grateful to Chairman
6 Takano for allowing me the opportunity to led this Women's
7 Task Force, and I think we are going to do some very good
8 work and I look forward to working with the American Legion
9 on this, and I know you are going to be very helpful in our
10 mission to make sure that we are meeting the needs of our
11 women veterans and their unique needs.

12 I know Congresswoman Underwood talked and asked some
13 questions, and I know that women veterans are a high
14 priority for the American Legion. And, as I said, I am
15 looking forward to doing that work.

16 I think there are, when we are talking about women
17 veterans and meeting their needs, I think there are probably
18 challenges that cannot necessarily be fixed by legislation,
19 but perhaps can be improved upon in terms of, you know,
20 cultural changes. And I think one of the bigger challenges
21 that I see, other than, you know, gender-specific health
22 care and other issues is how do we make sure, how do we
23 reach out, how do we make sure that our women veterans are
24 actually identifying as veterans and coming to the VA for
25 services?

1 And I do not know if anyone can really speak to that
2 but I think about--we just talked about the suicide rate
3 amongst our veterans, both men and women. Commander, you
4 talked about the women's suicide rate being twice what it is
5 in terms of civilian suicide. The Chairman talked about the
6 amount of veterans who are not using the VA who are
7 committing suicide, and we obviously know what that gap
8 means. I am wondering if you have a similar statistic with
9 the women veteran population in terms of their suicide rate.
10 I am assuming that the population is even greater in terms
11 of the women committing suicide that have not reached out to
12 utilize services from the VA, but I am just wondering if you
13 actually have that statistic.

14 Mr. Reistad. Senator and Chairman, I am afraid we do
15 not have that information available to us right now but we
16 would be more than happy to obtain that and get it to your
17 office as quickly as possible.

18 Ms. Brownley. Thank you. Thank you very much. And I
19 just think that--I am really looking forward to this work on
20 the task force and we hope to culminate that work by having
21 a large piece of legislation articulating to better meet the
22 needs of women veterans. But I think women suicide is of
23 particular concern and a very, very high priority.

24 Can you speak a little bit to some of the barriers that
25 you see in terms of women reaching out to the VA for their

1 benefits?

2 Mr. Reistad. With your permission I am going to ask
3 Chairman Bozella to answer your question. He has more
4 expertise in that area.

5 Mr. Bozella. Thank you, Commander. Representative
6 Brownley, you have taken care of one of the barriers with
7 the Child Care Act. In 2013, our American Legion system, we
8 are saving program--dedicated the whole year of visiting VA
9 hospitals for the purpose of assessing the women veterans'
10 health care situation at the time. Even though that was six
11 years ago, some of those barriers still exist--the privacy
12 issues, the lack of gender-specific care, the entrances, the
13 three levels of women's health care, which we are not going
14 to go into right now, and how those are set up in a VA.

15 But VA did authorize a mandate, a women's veterans
16 coordinator in every VA medical center. That was a key
17 component to getting things moving. Things are absolutely
18 improving. Are they were they need to be? No. But that
19 process has to continue.

20 I think your task force is a great idea, and we still
21 do System Worth Saving visits, of course. We do not
22 dedicate it to one subject. But on every visit we do we
23 have a women's veterans coordinator interview and we check
24 their program out. And I would like to invite you or a task
25 force member to accompany us on some of our System Worth

1 Saving visits, or more, and you can see firsthand how we
2 conduct that and how we can interact with women veterans.
3 That will provide you with a great deal of insight.

4 Ms. Brownley. That is excellent. And, Mr. Chairman, I
5 know I am over my time but I would be remiss--I want to make
6 sure that the Commander knows how well Director Shuman and
7 his colleagues represent the American Legion here on Capitol
8 Hill every single day. So thank you for that and thank you.
9 I yield back.

10 [Applause.]

11 Mr. Reistad. Thank you.

12 Chairman Takano. The gentlewoman yields back. I would
13 now like to recognize the Senator from Arkansas, Mr.
14 Boozman.

15 Senator Boozman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank
16 you all for being here. As I said, with the Disabled
17 Veterans, we work hard in a very bipartisan way to push
18 things forward. Nothing helps more than having a full room.
19 And so thank you all for being here. Thank you for taking
20 the time, traipsing these halls, getting lots of steps in,
21 you know, in the last few days. But there is simply no
22 substitute for that.

23 And we appreciate you so much, Commander Reistad, and
24 then also your team. Not only your team that is assembled
25 here today but the team that has been assembled for many,

1 many years, year after year, you know, doing the great work.
2 And we can be very, very proud of the fact that we have been
3 able to keep more and more promises that are being made. We
4 always have to remember that these are not give-mes. These
5 are earned benefits. And so, again, we appreciate your
6 service.

7 Nobody does a better job than those from Arkansas, and
8 we appreciate their efforts. Wave to me if you are--I will
9 not make you call the hogs, but we do appreciate you being
10 here, so thank you so much.

11 [Applause.]

12 Senator Boozman. I would like to talk about just a
13 couple of things real quickly, and, you know, the themes are
14 here. One of them is suicide. We have been talking about
15 that all day. It is so, so very important. One of the
16 things that I would really like to concentrate on, this
17 Committee and then on the Appropriations Committee, we are
18 spending lots of money on suicide. That is a good thing.
19 But we do not seem to be moving the needle, you know, a
20 whole bunch. Every year the statistic seems to be the same.

21 So one thing that we would really like to concentrate
22 on is evidence-based, you know, things that are actually
23 making a difference, you know, putting the metrics in place.
24 So I really do not have a question about that. What I would
25 like is a commitment just that you can help us in that

1 regard, again, to insist that we make sure that the dollars
2 that we are spend--and we are spending lots of dollars in
3 this area--making sure that we have the evidence and this
4 and that that are backing that up so that we can move the
5 needle in the future. Suicide is such a difficult problem.
6 You know, it is just a--it is a hard nut to crack. But I do
7 think that that would be helpful.

8 The other thing I would like to talk a little bit about
9 is homelessness, and in your testimony you talked about, you
10 know, PTSD, people that, you know, felt like they were not a
11 part, you know, all of the different things that contribute
12 to that, not only with suicide but also with homelessness
13 too.

14 And so I guess my question in that regard is, as I
15 said, we are spending a lot of money in that area. Can you
16 talk to us a little bit about any ideas you have got as to
17 how we can do a better job in that regard?

18 Mr. Reistad. Yes, sir. There are several things that
19 we can do. As far as homelessness is concerned we can
20 invest in affordable housing, supportive services for our
21 veteran families, and transitional resources to help our
22 homeless veterans get back on their feet in their
23 communities.

24 But I would like, with your permission, Mr. Chairman,
25 to ask Chairman Troiola of our Veterans Education and

1 Employment Commission to respond to that question as well.

2 Mr. Troiola. Thank you for your question, Senator.

3 The American Legion focuses more on prevention than the
4 actual homelessness itself. We feel that if we get them
5 before they hit the streets that we have a better success
6 rate. We offer support for at-risk veterans during the
7 transition process and also homeless veterans that have been
8 out there for a while. What we ask--what we try to do is we
9 try to get them help with health care, help with veterans'
10 benefits, counseling, advice that they may need.

11 We recommend that Congress continue to fund the
12 homeless veterans transitional housing program at the level
13 of needed demonstration in their local communities.

14 Senator Boozman. Very good. Commander, we have got
15 the access standards, you know, the proposed access
16 standards regarding the Mission Act, and it seems like, you
17 know, that that is being something that, you know, is
18 accepted, you know, moving in the right direction.

19 One of the promises that was made in regard to--as we
20 went forward with these things is having the ability from
21 input, you know, from you and others. Have you all been
22 pleased with that? Have been able to give any input in
23 regard to the standards? I do think--you know, this--you
24 all are the ones--the answers need to come from the bottom
25 up, and I have had a little bit of concern in that regard.

1 Can you address that very quickly?

2 Mr. Reistad. Yes. Mr. Chairman, if I can defer to one
3 of our resident experts here at the front table I would like
4 to ask Director Shuman of our Legislative Division to
5 respond to that question.

6 Mr. Shuman. Thank you for the question, Senator. We
7 have been engaged. Secretary Wilkie himself has come over
8 and met with our executive director and our Veteran Affairs
9 and Rehabilitation team to be involved. We very much look
10 forward--you will find no greater friend to the American
11 Legion to vigilantly be aware and watch how these access
12 standards are being implemented, and the first second we see
13 veterans not being treated and receiving the care they need
14 we will be knocking on your door.

15 Senator Boozman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

16 Chairman Takano. The Senator yields back. I would now
17 like to recognize the Senate Ranking Member of the Veterans'
18 Affairs Committee in the Senate, the gentleman from Montana,
19 Senator Tester.

20 Senator Tester. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman, and
21 once again thank you all for being here.

22 We have talked about suicides and there was a point
23 brought up earlier, I think, by you, Chairman Bozella, that
24 guardsmen and reservists are not eligible for mental health
25 care or vet centers. I have got a bill that will take care

1 of that, and it applies to both reservists and guardsmen.

2 [Applause.]

3 Senator Tester. And it applies to them even if they
4 have not been deployed, which I think is also critically
5 important. We have not introduced it in the 116th yet. I
6 need a partner on the Republican side before we are going to
7 drop this bill in because it needs to be bipartisan. So I
8 just want to bring that out and hopefully we can get some
9 folks to jump on board, because one suicide is too many and
10 we have got far more than that.

11 Command Reistad, I just kind of want to get your
12 general views on VA health care. Would I be correct in
13 saying that a majority of your members prefer care directly
14 from the VA? Would that be a correct statement?

15 Mr. Reistad. Yes, that would be a correct statement.

16 Senator Tester. Okay. Do they believe that--do you
17 believe or they believe that community providers should be
18 held to the same standard as VA providers?

19 Mr. Reistad. Absolutely, they should.

20 Senator Tester. And when it comes to expansion of
21 care, would the American Legion be alarmed if access in the
22 community meant a reduction in quality or timeliness of care
23 for your membership?

24 Mr. Reistad. Well, with all due respect, sir, whether
25 you know it or not, today is National No-Brainer Day.

1 [Laughter.]

2 Mr. Reistad. And I would have to say that that is a
3 no-brainer.

4 Senator Tester. Perfect. That is what I was hoping
5 for. Well, I mean, those are things we have got to be aware
6 of, because the truth is that the VA does get a lot of
7 criticism but they do a lot of stuff really well.

8 Mr. Reistad. Absolutely.

9 Senator Tester. And the fact is that when we go into
10 the private sector, if we are increasing--if we are making
11 wait times better but decreasing quality of care we did not
12 win. If we are making wait times longer we did not win. So
13 those are important things moving forward, because I think
14 the VA, we need to--my personal opinion, I think most
15 people's opinion, and I think certainly the American Legion
16 is build capacity within the VA, make it all it can be, and
17 then if it cannot meet the needs put them out in the
18 community.

19 I want to talk about the budget for a second. Normally
20 we have the budget by now. We do not have it quite yet.
21 But I would like to give the American Legion an opportunity
22 to talk about what their priorities should be in this fiscal
23 year's budget.

24 Mr. Reistad. Well, thank you for the question, and,
25 Mr. Chairman, I think this question would be better answered

1 by our Legislative Director, Mr. Shuman.

2 Mr. Shuman. Well, thank you for the question, Mr.
3 Ranking Member. I think all of our priorities are right
4 here. I think when it comes to the VA budget there was--it
5 was shared several months ago that the President's
6 administration asked for a 5 percent cut to all federal
7 agencies and instantly the American Legion began engaging
8 senior leadership at VA and, of course, the White House to
9 say this is not a time to be cutting any budget from the
10 Department of Veterans Affairs. This is a time to ensuring
11 that we keep the promises made to the men and women who have
12 selflessly raised their right hands.

13 [Applause.]

14 Senator Tester. Well, thank you, and thank you all of
15 what you do, representing the fighting men and women in this
16 country. I appreciate your testimony. Thank you, Commander
17 Reistad.

18 Mr. Reistad. Thank you.

19 Chairman Takano. The Senator yields back. I now would
20 like to recognize the gentleman from Louisiana, Senator
21 Cassidy, for five minutes.

22 Senator Cassidy. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Any of my
23 folks from Louisiana still here? I think I saw--oh yeah.
24 Thank you.

25 So if Sullivan was still here I would tell him every

1 Sunday I teach Sunday School. I actually teach first-
2 graders so it is more riot control. But one of the fellows
3 goes up to Alaska regularly, and we always look at the
4 weather in Nome and Anchorage and compare it to Louisiana.
5 I can tell you, folks in Alaska, come down to Mardi Gras
6 this time of year, you know, and I think you will be less
7 likely to die from cold exposure.

8 I am a doctor, and so as we have spoken of suicide and
9 mental health it matters a heck of a lot to me. But I am
10 going to take it from a little bit of a different approach.
11 Chairman Bozella, you said something earlier. You spoke of
12 that sense of purpose that some folks leave. Now the
13 literature shows that the greatest risk for suicide is
14 within the first year or so after separation from the
15 service, and one thing that is great to see is some young
16 folks in your audience, because obviously you need that
17 connection with those who are just leaving the service.

18 But I remember seeing a video of one man who had
19 attempted to commit suicide and his wife found him. And he
20 was hanging himself and she picks him up and somehow gets
21 him off. Incredibly moving. And they are interviewing him
22 afterwards and he said, "I did not quite know what I was
23 doing. All I know is that a year ago I was a Marine and now
24 I was fill-in-the-blank." There was not that sense of
25 purpose.

1 Now then, go to another conversation I had this past
2 week with a major employer in my hometown of Baton Rouge,
3 and I think they tell me that they are the leading employer
4 of veterans. They do construction work, pipelines, and
5 civil engineering, and they find it is a team, it is a goal,
6 it is responsibility, it is a mission, it is authority. And
7 so everything that gives that sense of purpose.

8 Now why do I go into this? One, it is important, but
9 secondly, the way they have achieved this is they have hired
10 someone who was experienced with the bureaucracy that knows
11 how to get a veteran about--excuse me, a serviceperson about
12 to be released and put them through the training program
13 they may need in order to have the skill set in order to
14 then join their company. And I thought to myself, I am so
15 glad you are doing it, performance contracting, but why do
16 you have to hire somebody specifically to make it happen?
17 What can we do to streamline it so that that veteran--excuse
18 me--the person who is about to be a veteran does not need
19 someone to guide them through any more than as you check
20 out, this is what you can do? Do you follow what I am
21 saying there? Any comments on that? Commander?

22 Mr. Bozella. Thank you, Commander, and thank you,
23 Senator Cassidy. You know, with the sense of purpose also
24 comes a sense of belonging.

25 Senator Cassidy. Yes.

1 Mr. Bozella. There were two issues there, and they go
2 hand in hand. And that Marine, a year later, is wondering
3 "Who am I? What am I doing?" One of the ways you gain that
4 sense of purpose is to continue to serve, and people who
5 have joined our military, they serve. And when you get
6 involved in the veteran service organization, the American
7 Legion, believe me, we will put you to work. You will find
8 a way to serve. That is one way. That is a streamlined,
9 one of the ways that I see it.

10 I am a combat veteran to Vietnam. When I came home I
11 went through that. I know what it is to live it and it took
12 a while to find myself through that. And one of the
13 greatest ways I found myself was through being able to serve
14 other veterans. That became my sense of purpose, even
15 though I was employed in a different field, and I was able
16 to develop that. And I see that with a lot of younger
17 veterans when we are able to talk to them.

18 So how do we connect them to those kind of employment
19 opportunities? I believe that probably would be something
20 that our employment people at this table could answer that
21 better.

22 Mr. Reistad. With your permission, Mr. Chairman, I am
23 going to ask Chairman Troiola to respond to that.

24 Mr. Shuman. So, Senator, we spend quite a bit of time
25 with our Small Business Task Force in terms of engaging and

1 certainly credentialing as well. We meet with and work with
2 the Department of Defense, really. We just had a meeting
3 with the Sergeant Major of the Army Dailey who is doing a
4 wonderful job in transitioning and finding credentialing
5 programs. We want to be able to make sure and really in
6 partnership with small businesses and our credentialing
7 roundtables that we find the best practical ways to
8 transition so when these servicemembers leave they have a
9 certificate and really a means to be able to find that
10 purpose that you were mentioning.

11 Senator Cassidy. Well, thank you for that. One bill I
12 sponsored and passed when I was in the House was to allow
13 those folks trained as EMTs in the military to get
14 credentialed, whichever state they went to, with minimal
15 hassle, figuring this great training they have had would
16 help address a shortage that we have in our person power, if
17 you will.

18 So if you have those paradigms, Director Shuman, or
19 Commander, please share them with me.

20 Again, I thank you for all you do. Our country would
21 not be what it is without you. I appreciate it.

22 I yield back. Thank you.

23 Chairman Takano. The Senator yields back. I now would
24 like to recognize the Member of Congress from the state of
25 New Hampshire, Mr. Pappas, for five minutes.

1 Mr. Pappas. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you to
2 Ranking Member Roe and Commander Reistad, it is a pleasure
3 and an honor to be with you. As the grandson of three World
4 War II veterans I honor the service of our men and women who
5 have worn the uniform of this country and it is an honor to
6 be a part of this Committee and to be working with you, your
7 leadership, your members, and veterans' advocates across
8 this country to ensure that we get implementation right of
9 so many of the key strategies that have been put into law in
10 the recent past. And I think that is a common theme you are
11 hearing here. This is where the rubber hits the road in
12 this term.

13 As the Chair of the Oversight Subcommittee of the House
14 Veterans' Affairs Committee I want to ensure that we are
15 doing that in a responsive way for the veterans of this
16 country, that we are honoring their service and ensuring
17 that we are providing the best care possible.

18 One of my concerns, as, you know, someone from the
19 Granite State, which is not as big as Alaska but is mighty
20 in terms of its veteran population--we have 14,12 members of
21 the Legion in my state--is that we are meeting their needs
22 in terms of pain management and ensuring that we are not
23 seeing the type of over-prescribing and linkages to the
24 opioid crisis that have been unfolding in tragic ways across
25 this country. We lost 72,000 individuals in this country

1 last year to overdose deaths because of opioids, and many of
2 those are veterans.

3 So I am wondering how you can assess the response of
4 the VA to this crisis and what potentially community
5 partners can learn from the VA's experiences.

6 Mr. Reistad. Well, Congressman, thank you first for
7 your question, and with the consent of the Chairman I am
8 going to ask Chairman Bozella to respond to your question.

9 Senator Pappas. Thank you.

10 Mr. Bozella. Thank you, Commander. Congressman, the
11 pain management issue is a major issue across our country.
12 Obviously opioids, some people think, is the number one
13 problem in this country because of the addiction that comes
14 along with that. Also, the psychotropic drugs that are used
15 for PTSD--and, by the way, there is not a magic PTSD pill,
16 and most of those drugs have adverse effects on people too.
17 So we need to do a better job of finding the treatments that
18 will work for people.

19 One of the aspects that we are looking at, that we
20 investigate in the American Legion through the VA, are the
21 complementary and alternative medicines--the yoga, music,
22 equine therapy, fly-fishing. I mean, it may sound trivial.
23 It is not. That is one of the ways that people can manage
24 their pain. Pain management clinics, VA has those kind of
25 clinics.

1 So the advocacy is to move in that direction and away
2 from the kind of drugs that are causing a lot of problems
3 with people these days.

4 Senator Pappas. Thank you. I appreciate the response.

5 One of the issues that the Legion members from New
6 Hampshire raised with me is a problem that they have seen
7 with arbitration clauses that prevent reservists who are
8 returning to their jobs after serving on active duty from
9 getting back into the role that they once had. And I am
10 wondering if you have seen this on a national scale.

11 Mr. Reistad. Congressman, I would like to ask Director
12 Shuman to please respond to your question.

13 Senator Pappas. Thank you.

14 Mr. Shuman. Thank you for that, Congressman. We
15 really appreciate the Granite State as well.

16 I will say this. Yes, we have seen it as an issue and
17 we need to find a way to create a partnership between you
18 and us in terms of finding a way to prevent USERRA rights
19 from being thrown away. If we do not have the ability, and
20 private companies do not have the ability to take away our
21 First Amendment rights they should not be able to take away
22 our USERRA rights either. These people and these members of
23 the Armed Forces serve honorably and we promise them that we
24 will protect their jobs. Finding a way to--federal
25 legislation to prevent arbitration clauses is probably the

1 step in the right direction.

2 Senator Pappas. Thank you. One final question. In my
3 state we have a 2.5 percent unemployment rate, which is
4 great, but it makes it hard to recruit and retain medical
5 professionals. And a recent GAO report found that over 10
6 percent of full-time and authorized budget positions are
7 vacant, and that means about 45,000 vacancies across this
8 country.

9 I am wondering if you know of some ways that the VA can
10 continue to work to attract highly qualified medical
11 professionals to fill positions and offer the care that
12 veterans need?

13 Mr. Reistad. Thank you for the question, sir. I am
14 going to ask our Director of Veterans Affairs and
15 Rehabilitation, Mr. Nuntavong, to please respond to your
16 question. Thank you.

17 Mr. Nuntavong. Thank you for your question,
18 Congressman. The pay disparities between VA physicians and
19 physicians in private care is drastic. We need to find a
20 way to fund the VA physicians and health care providers
21 better. That is the bottom line.

22 Senator Pappas. Dollars and cents. Thanks so much.

23 Chairman Takano. The gentleman yields back. I now
24 would like to recognize the gentleman from Kansas, Senator
25 Moran.

1 Senator Moran. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

2 Thank you, Commander, for your presence here and for your
3 colleagues with you. I had the opportunity to meet with
4 members of the Kansas American Legion yesterday in my
5 office--Dan Wylie [phonetic], Dave Wornkin [phonetic], and
6 Gaylord Sandeman [phonetic]. We previewed the conversation
7 we might have today, and I appreciate every year that you
8 and the members of the American Legion come see me.

9 I also know, Commander, I know former National
10 Commander Mike Helm very well, a Kansan, and I recognize the
11 tremendous amount of work that goes into the job that you
12 have, and we welcome you when you visit our state.

13 You have more credibility, Commander, than I do, but I
14 think the American Legion and I are on a mission together.
15 You have been--American Legion has been an ally in
16 everything that I can think of we worked on in regard to
17 veterans for as long as I have been in Congress. But I want
18 to give you the chance to help me get a piece of legislation
19 passed.

20 Today I introduced, with a number of my colleagues,
21 legislation called the Fairness For Korean DMZ Veterans Act.
22 What we have learned is that there are veterans who had
23 exposure to chemicals, to Agent Orange, in the Korean DMZ
24 prior to the current preemptive--I am sorry--the presumptive
25 date of April 1968. Evidence from the Department of Defense

1 shows that testing and spray of Agent Orange and other
2 herbicides was being conducted prior to that April 1968
3 date, and yet the VA has not changed its current dates for
4 that presumptive eligibility to reflect those instances of
5 earlier exposure.

6 So this legislation corrects that mistake, that error.
7 It requires the VA to recognize the facts as we now know
8 them, and in the process take care of many veterans, many
9 military men and women who were exposed to something that is
10 very dangerous to them, and I might add something that can
11 be very dangerous to their children and grandchildren. It
12 is--I have every expectation that every man and woman who
13 served in our military knew that they were risking
14 themselves, their own lives, and their own futures. What a
15 tremendous burden it must be to know that your actions in
16 serving our country could have caused harm to your children
17 and grandchildren, something that no one would ever want.

18 So we have worked on a number of instances to try to
19 deal with Agent Orange and other chemicals. Commander, I
20 believe that the American Legion supports this legislation.
21 If you say yes I am going to ask you to explain to me and to
22 my colleagues why.

23 Mr. Reistad. Well, Senator Moran, absolutely yes, and
24 let me just go back about a week in time to my travels in
25 Mississippi. I had the occasion to sit with a veteran at a

1 function that we were at, who began a conversation with me
2 regarding this very issue. He served in the United States
3 Army in 1967 along the DMZ, and he informed me that while he
4 was there he observed the defoliant Agent Orange being
5 sprayed along the areas that he was situated at the DMZ.

6 And he inquired about the status of the legislation,
7 the prior legislation that you had introduced into Congress,
8 and I did some quick searches on my smart phone and came up
9 with the legislation and the information he requested, and
10 noticed that there was no traction on that. I guess it
11 never got out of committee for a vote. And he was very
12 disappointed to hear that. And the man obviously had
13 obvious Parkinson's. He was shaking and he expressed great
14 concern over that.

15 And that, I think, is where the wheels went in motion,
16 and I made it a point to convey those concerns to our
17 legislative director sitting beside me. And it was through
18 his efforts that your office was contacted and this
19 legislation will again be introduced. And I am so thankful
20 for that and I assure you he will be as well.

21 Senator Moran. Thank you for relaying that story. I
22 would tell you our previous efforts, our continuing efforts
23 in regard to Agent Orange and other toxic chemicals. We
24 have had some success, and portions of that legislation have
25 become law, pulled out of that legislation and passed with

1 other pieces of legislation, including the declassification,
2 more declassification of Department of Defense records, so
3 that a veteran can better access and prove his case, or her
4 case, of where they were stationed and what their chances of
5 exposure to those toxic substances were. And the medical
6 research has now been conducted that further demonstrates
7 the connection between generations and exposure to Agent
8 Orange.

9 So we are setting the stage for additional
10 opportunities for Congress and for the American people to
11 support those who served our country and served it in a way
12 that caused them to be exposed to chemicals very dangerous
13 to their health, and perhaps to their families' health.

14 So, Commander, thanks for being an ally in this regard
15 and thank you for your endorsement of that legislation.

16 Mr. Reistad. Thank you, sir.

17 Chairman Takano. The Senator yields back. Senator, I
18 want you to know that the Korean War veterans exposed to
19 Agent Orange are covered under Section 3 of my bill, H.R.
20 299, so I look forward to working with you.

21 I now would like to recognize the gentlewoman from
22 Hawaii, Senator Hirono, for five minutes.

23 Senator Hirono. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I
24 join all my colleagues in thanking all of you for being here
25 today, for your service, and I would like to give a shout-

1 out to the folks from Hawaii. And if you are still in the
2 audience and can stand I would like to recognize John
3 Williams and David Carlson from Hawaii. They came a long
4 way to be with us. Mahalo.

5 [Applause.]

6 Senator Hirono. Commander, last year, as you
7 mentioned, we passed very important legislation, the VA
8 Mission Act, to overhaul the Choice program. And we want to
9 make sure, though, that we are not heading toward
10 privatizing, as you put it, the greatest health care system
11 in the country.

12 So I wanted to get your thoughts on a specific thing
13 that is happening under the implementation of the Mission
14 Act. The VA recently released the proposed access standards
15 for community care under the Mission Act. Are you at all
16 concerned that the access standards, which I assume you are
17 familiar with what I am talking about, as it is proposed,
18 could move us toward privatizing the VA system?

19 Mr. Reistad. Senator, thank you for your question, and
20 with the consent of the Chairman I would like to ask
21 Chairman Bozella to respond.

22 Mr. Bozella. Thank you, Commander. Thank you,
23 Senator. The Mission Act, of course, is on everybody's
24 radar screen, very high. The American Legion worked hard on
25 the Mission Act with other entities of Congress and VA to

1 make this a reality.

2 I think the first thing that we always need to keep
3 foremost in all of our minds is all care through VA is VA
4 care. We sometimes seem to forget that when we talk about
5 care of the community or non-VA care, those kind of terms.
6 And when it comes to--whether or not that is privatization,
7 we are carefully monitoring every aspect of that to ensure
8 that if it turns into privatization we will raise the flag.

9 The thing about VA care is as long as we know that it
10 is VA care, if there are problems, and somebody was
11 mentioning earlier there are always going to be problems, a
12 new system coming on and all that, we know where to go. We
13 are going to go to VA as a VSO, as a leading VSO, to work
14 with them to help fix that problem. We are going to be here
15 to testify before you about those problems. If it is all
16 privatized, who do we go to? So we have to remember--

17 Senator Hirono. Exactly.

18 Mr. Bozella. --we have got to work hard to keep it VA
19 care. And we are familiar with the access standards. We
20 had some input into that. And the one concern that we have
21 is urgent care and the \$30 copays on the third visit. We
22 are not going to be in acceptance of any copays for service-
23 connected disabled veterans.

24 Senator Hirono. Thank you very much.

25 Commander, I am glad that you mentioned that suicide

1 prevention is still a major factor, a major concern, and
2 that suicide rates are going up. So there was a GAO study
3 regarding what the VA is doing in preventing suicides, and
4 so I do thank Senator Blumenthal, who is right here with us--
5 -not to steal his thunder--but under his leadership Senators
6 Boozman, Tillis, who you heard from earlier, and I will be
7 introducing tomorrow Reach Every Veteran in Crisis Act. And
8 this bill does make reference to the GAO report and the
9 shortcomings in the VA. So we are on that page with you,
10 Commander.

11 There was also a reference to the telehealth services,
12 because much of our country is in rural areas. It is an
13 issue that Senator Harris and I took up and there is a
14 provision--there was a provision in the Mission Act to allow
15 for more telehealth, and I am glad to know that it is
16 working out and that you would like to see that further
17 developed.

18 So, the other questions were already asked, but we are
19 on the page with all of you. Thank you so very much for
20 being here. Mahalo. I yield back.

21 Mr. Reistad. Thank you.

22 Chairman Takano. The Senator yields back. I would now
23 like to recognize the gentleman from Vermont, Mr. Sanders.

24 Senator Sanders. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman,
25 and let me thank Commander Reistad for being here and your

1 fantastic staff.

2 Mr. Reistad. Thank you.

3 Senator Sanders. And let me thank all of the men and
4 women in the room. You have done something above and beyond
5 what human beings are normally asked to do. You have put
6 your lives on the line to defend this country, and all of us
7 are deeply grateful to you. And it seems to me, having made
8 that commitment to this country, we owe you nothing less
9 than, among other things, the best quality health care that
10 this nation can provide to anybody. You have deserved that
11 and we thank you for that.

12 [Applause.]

13 Senator Sanders. And I also want to thank the Legion
14 not only for the great work you do on veterans' issues but
15 what you do in our communities. In Vermont, for example,
16 your Boys State and Girls State programs are very, very
17 important. I worry very much that a lot of the young people
18 in our country, the kids in this country do not understand
19 what you put your lives on the line to defend. They do not
20 know what the Constitution of America is about. They do not
21 know what democracy is about. And you do a great job, in a
22 very nonpartisan way, in Vermont, in getting kids to think
23 about these important issues. So thank you very much for
24 doing that.

25 I had the honor of being Chairman of this Senate

1 Committee a number of years ago, and we tried to do our best
2 to expand VA health care. We did not quite get the support
3 that we wanted, the bipartisan support that we wanted. But
4 there was one issue--two issues, actually--that we raised,
5 one where I think we have had some success, one not so much
6 success.

7 When we talk about health care it has always seemed to
8 me that dental care is part of health care. All right?

9 [Applause.]

10 Mr. Reistad. Absolutely.

11 Senator Sanders. And I can tell you that in Vermont
12 you have got a lot of veterans who have serious problems
13 with their teeth, and if you have dental problems that could
14 lead to other health problems. And one of the things we
15 tried to do is to make dental care a part of VA health care,
16 not just for service-connected folks but for every veteran
17 who accesses VA health care. Commander, is that something
18 that makes sense to you?

19 Mr. Reistad. Mr. Chairman, thank you for your
20 question. Absolutely it makes sense to me, and I would like
21 to ask Director Nuntavong to please elaborate on that.

22 Mr. Nuntavong. Thank you for your question, Senator.
23 As I testified before the Senate Committee a few months ago,
24 dental care is health care. Our veterans deserve that
25 health care. When I was on active duty I saw the dentist

1 twice a year regularly to receive my care, and that care
2 needs to continue on as I am a veteran of these United
3 States.

4 Senator Sanders. All right. So I look forward--we
5 will introduce legislation, and have in the past, to make
6 dental care part of VA health care, and we look forward to
7 working with you on that.

8 Let me touch on the broader issue that Senator Hirono
9 and Senator Tester and others have raised. And I can recall
10 like it was yesterday, I think it was right in this room,
11 when I was Chair we had a hearing and we had all of the
12 veterans' organizations. We had the Legion there, we had
13 the VFW, the DAV, and so forth. And I went down the list
14 and I asked them whether they thought VA health care was of
15 high quality. And without exception, including the American
16 Legion, the answer was yes, we are proud of what the VA
17 does. Could it be better? We all agree it can.

18 But one of the things we are also aware of, because the
19 VA is government program, that every time there is a problem
20 in the VA it makes the front pages of the newspapers. When
21 there is a problem in a private hospital, somehow it does
22 not make the front pages of the paper.

23 Now one of the concerns that I have is we have a
24 national health care system with a lot of problems. We have
25 got 30 million people uninsured. We have even more

1 underinsured with high deductibles and copayments. We pay
2 the highest prices in the world for prescription drugs. And
3 in many ways the VA has dealt with that issue. It has said,
4 "Come on in to the VA. We are going to give you holistic
5 health care, and the door is open to you, and the cost of
6 prescription drugs will be lower than in the private
7 sector."

8 It is no secret to you, or to any American--now there
9 are big differences of opinion here in Congress. There are
10 people who do believe in privatization. And what I fear
11 very much is if we continue to put all kinds of money into
12 the private sector you are going to be taking money out of
13 the VA. And I worry very much that as we speak today there
14 are 46,000 vacancies in VA health care, and we cannot expect
15 VA to provide the quality care they should if there are
16 those kinds of vacancies.

17 Do you share the concern that some of us have raised
18 about the fact that we are not adequately funding the VA in
19 making sure that we fill those vacancies? Is that a
20 concern, Commander, that you have?

21 Mr. Reistad. Senator Sanders, I would like to ask
22 Director Shuman to please respond to your question.

23 Mr. Shuman. Thank you so very much, Senator. It is
24 absolutely crucial that we fill the 46,000 vacancies at VA.
25 As I have said, you have no greater friend than the American

1 Legion in really working on reforms and legislation to make
2 that happen.

3 Senator Sanders. Okay. And, by the way, thank you,
4 Matt, thank you very much for coming to Vermont for that
5 very great town meeting we did.

6 Mr. Chairman, my time has expired. Thank you very
7 much. I yield.

8 Chairman Takano. The gentleman yields back. I am
9 informed that Dr. Roe, the Ranking Member of the House
10 Committee would like to--I would like to recognize him for
11 five minutes.

12 Dr. Roe. Well, it looks like the news story today is
13 that Senator Sanders moved over to the Republican side.

14 [Laughter.]

15 Chairman Takano. Mr. Chairman, he is still to the
16 left.

17 Senator Sanders. Not very likely.

18 [Laughter.]

19 Chairman Takano. But he is still seated to the left.

20 Dr. Roe. Glad to have you here, Senator. First of
21 all, Matt, thank you--excuse me, Mr. Shuman. You have a
22 great staff, Commander, it is a pleasure to work with you
23 guys, so thank you for that.

24 I want to go through a few things very quickly. As the
25 Chairman just said, the bill we passed in the House last

1 year did cover the Korean--the area in Korea that was
2 sprayed by Agent Orange, for the Blue Water Navy. I have
3 some empathy with that because I stomped around that piece
4 of ground for about a year of my life.

5 I also want to congratulate the Legion on its 100th
6 birthday. My old division, Second Division, stood up 101
7 years ago, so it is basically the same age of the Legion.
8 And I also want to thank the Legion. One of the pieces of
9 legislation that I carry with some pride from this is the
10 Harry Colmery Forever GI Bill. That is a great--I used the
11 GI Bill in 1975, when I got out of the Army, and I am
12 grateful, Commander, to this day, of the \$300 a month that
13 my country invested in me at that time to finish my
14 education. And now that you can use it the rest of your
15 life, technology is changing so rapidly, that I thought that
16 was--and we fully paid for that.

17 I do want to mention just one thing, and, Matt, you
18 were very clear on that. Those 46,000, they are funded
19 positions. When I got here in the Congress, in 2009, we
20 spent \$97.5 billion on all VA care. That is health care,
21 disability benefits, and cemeteries.

22 And I also want to say one thing about cemeteries.
23 Nobody in the world does it better than the VA. The VA
24 cemeteries are phenomenal. I visited, I do not know how
25 many. I have one a mile from my home in Johnson City,

1 Tennessee. I tell you, if you ever go to sacred ground it
2 is a VA cemetery, or a national cemetery, this government
3 does. And we went--last year we took a group to Europe to
4 see the World War II and World War I cemeteries. It was an
5 extremely moving time for me to have visited those areas and
6 to see how sacred that ground is.

7 We were spending 97.5. Our budget last year was north
8 of \$200 billion. So the VA has been funded, and everywhere
9 I go ask them, "Do you have adequate resources to carry out
10 your mission?" And basically what they tell me at the VA
11 medical centers and other places, they do have adequate
12 funding to do that. Are there areas that need more funding?
13 Sure. But I think right now that the VA, at least what I
14 hear from the central office and from going down to various
15 places that they have that.

16 Suicide, to me, is one of the things I think that has
17 bothered me the most--a young person, or even someone my age
18 now that sees that as their only out in life. I mentioned,
19 when Commander Hastings, the Tennessee Guard was here
20 before, he, when he commanded--he has been replaced now--but
21 they started a program called Guard Your Buddy, and he had
22 four suicides in the first 40 days he was the commander of
23 the Tennessee Guard. We have got to do something.

24 So they put this program in and they have reduced
25 suicide in the Tennessee Guard by almost 70 percent. And I

1 asked, "Is this scalable?" It is, to our guard and
2 reservist members and we should look at programs that work
3 like that, and do not reinvent the wheel. Do that across
4 the country. I think that is doable and it is not very
5 expensive.

6 And I asked last year--we were spending \$8 billion a
7 year--Senator Boozman talked about this--on mental health
8 issues and suicide, and we had not moved the needle at all.
9 So I said, "Why do not we do something different?" And we
10 had our hearing last September, and then a roundtable
11 following that, and the Chairman is going to continue this,
12 I know, and work with us on trying to find out what works.
13 And let us quit doing the same thing. Let us do something
14 different.

15 Lastly, and basically I want to ask you guys, on the
16 Appeals Modernization Act. I guess our office is probably
17 the most common thing we deal with are appeals that are
18 backlogged. How do you guys see the new AMA program
19 working? And it just went live last week for everybody, and
20 which--how do you advise a--one of your members which lane
21 to get into?

22 Mr. Reistad. Well, thank you for your question,
23 Congressman, and I would ask our Chairman, Ralph Bozella, of
24 Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation to respond to your
25 question please.

1 Senator Roe. Thank you.

2 Mr. Bozella. Thank you, Commander. Thank you, Dr.

3 Roe. Of course, the American Legion worked with Congress,
4 with VA, with the Board of Veterans Appeals to design and
5 develop that legislation. It was signed by the President on
6 our stage at our national convention in 2017, and we believe
7 it will work.

8 And the key to that is training--training our service
9 officers how to do this in the best way, how to give that
10 advice to that veteran, making that choice of the higher
11 review, the supplemental claim, or going directly to the
12 Board of Veterans Appeals. And that is where we are going
13 to focus our efforts. There is not a simple answer for
14 everybody. It is up to that veteran to make that choice,
15 based on the information that we can provide them.

16 Dr. Roe. Thank you. I yield back. Thank you, Mr.
17 Bozella.

18 Chairman Takano. Thank you. Chairman Roe yields--
19 Ranking Member Roe yields back. I would like to now
20 recognize the gentleman from Connecticut, former Marine
21 veteran, Senator Blumenthal, for five minutes.

22 Senator Blumenthal. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank
23 you to you and members of the House Committee for being here
24 today. We appreciate your coming over to the Senate side,
25 whether it is the left or the right part of the dais and

1 podium. And thank you, Commander, for you and your team
2 being here and your leadership day in and day out. I know
3 from my experience in Connecticut, as a proud member of the
4 Legion, that you are involved in so many community
5 activities, and particularly the Boys State activities where
6 two of my sons--three of my sons have participated, I
7 believe, two of them now veterans themselves. And they
8 better be members of the American Legion, as a matter of
9 fact, if they know what is good for them.

10 I want to thank Tom Flowers--I think he is here today--
11 the commander of the Connecticut department. Thank you very
12 much, and everyone from Connecticut who is here. This is a
13 great day for you to be here, when we are introducing
14 legislation in honor of your being here, the Reach Every
15 Veteran in Crisis Act, which I am helping to lead along with
16 my colleagues, Senators Boozman, Sullivan, Hirono, and
17 Brown--you heard Senator Hirono talk about it--because the
18 VA has failed in reaching out to veterans who are at risk of
19 suicide, spending only a tiny fraction of the money
20 appropriated by the United States Congress for them to do
21 their job.

22 There has not been a lot of talk this morning about the
23 Blue Water Navy Act. We came literally within a hair in the
24 Senate. One or two members blocked unanimous consent from
25 our proceeding with the House bill. Thanks to the House,

1 which was, I think, near unanimous in supporting it.

2 Unfortunately, here in the Senate we dropped the ball. And

3 again, coming to the VA, I must say we all regret that

4 Secretary Wilkie has been equivocal. Members of his team

5 have been less than forthcoming in their support. I think

6 that is an understatement. I am here to ask for your

7 continued support in passing the Blue Water Navy Bill.

8 [Applause.]

9 Mr. Reistad. Thank you, Senator. We absolutely are in
10 support of that, and let me take a moment of personal

11 privilege. My Legion cover may say Virginia but I entered
12 the United States Army out of New Haven, Connecticut.

13 Senator Blumenthal. Thank you for your service, and
14 thank you for that Connecticut connection. We are proud of
15 it. Thank you.

16 The Agent Orange Exposure Fairness Act. I am the co-
17 sponsor of the measure that Senator Moran mentioned earlier,
18 because our battlefields are so rife with toxics and
19 poisonous substances, whether it is burn pits or the nerve
20 gas that are found literally on today's battlefield in Iraq,
21 Afghanistan, and Syria, where our men and women are exposed
22 to those risks.

23 The Agent Orange Exposure Fairness Act looks to the
24 time that is necessary for diseases to manifest themselves.
25 One of our fellow American Legion members, Gerry Wright, has

1 championed this step. He was my guest at the State of the
2 Union. We spoke to a lot of my colleague about the need for
3 the Agent Orange Exposure Fairness Act, not only for the
4 Vietnam veterans but also for veterans elsewhere in the
5 world--the Korean DMZ, for example, where they have been
6 similarly exposed to Agent Orange, which is a pesticide. It
7 is a toxic chemical that has caused illnesses that we have
8 not properly accounted for, and I hope for your support of
9 that measure as well.

10 Mr. Reistad. Senator, I believe we approved a
11 resolution for that at our last national convention. Mr.
12 Wright has been in continual contact with me about that, and
13 I know he has been traveling around the country asking for
14 support of that legislation and doing a dynamite job at it.
15 So you have our support.

16 Mr. Blumenthal. He has been tireless. As you know, he
17 traveled across the country on his motorcycle with the
18 insignia "Sprayed and Betrayed," which is a powerful way to
19 put the betrayal of trust by the VA in those veterans who
20 suffer from those diseases, as he does. And he is a real
21 champion and I know he has been in touch with you, probably
22 quite frequently. He is a great advocate.

23 And again, I just want to finish by thanking all of
24 your team. They do just a remarkable job here in the
25 Nation's Capital and all around the country. Thank you so

1 much.

2 Mr. Reistad. Thank you.

3 Chairman Takano. The Senator yields back. I want to
4 now recognize the gentleman from Texas, a new member of
5 Congress, Mr. Allred, for five minutes.

6 Mr. Allred. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and if there are
7 any Texans who have hung in there I would love it if you
8 could raise our hand or stand up. Just let me see you up
9 there. Thank you so much to the Texans for your incredible
10 service. I am incredibly honored to be representing Dallas.
11 Commander Reistad, thank you so much for being here today
12 and to your incredible staff.

13 I understand that I owe you a happy birthday coming up
14 here, nearly 100 years of incredible service to our nation's
15 combat veterans, and to really all of our veterans. And so
16 on behalf of the 34,000 veterans in my district, and really,
17 all of the people who live in my district, I want to thank
18 you and everybody at the Legion for all of your incredible
19 service to our country.

20 Mr. Reistad. Thank you.

21 Mr. Allred. I had the honor of being an appointee in
22 the Obama administration at the Department of Housing and
23 Urban Development before I sought this office, and we placed
24 a large focus on combating and ending veterans'
25 homelessness, through the HUD and VA supportive housing

1 program. And I was concerned to see, in 2017, a rise in
2 veterans' homelessness. I am happy to see that there was a
3 slight reversal of that in 2018.

4 And I would like to just ask you where we stand how HUD
5 and the VA are working together with you and with other VSOs
6 to combat veterans' homelessness, moving forward.

7 Mr. Reistad. I would like to ask our legislative
8 director, Matt Shuman, to elaborate, please.

9 Mr. Shuman. Thank you for the question, Congressman.
10 Making sure that there is not one homeless veteran on the
11 street is absolutely the critical mission, one of the
12 critical missions of the American Legion. The point in
13 time, in December, just a few months ago, roughly we had
14 about 30,000 veterans at any given point who were homeless,
15 and I think we have already said this, that is too many.

16 The HUD-VASH program and the SSVF programs really need
17 to be made permanent. We need the staff that run those
18 programs, do not need to be worrying about if they are going
19 to have a job in six months. If they are worrying about
20 themselves, how are they worrying about providing quality
21 services and wraparound services to veterans?

22 Further, it is not just about giving a homeless veteran
23 home. We can give them the biggest mansion in America.
24 Unless we also provide those wraparound services, from
25 health care to job placement and mental health, they are

1 going to end up back on the street. So we really need to
2 take care of those veterans.

3 Mr. Allred. Thank you, Mr. Shuman. I completely agree
4 with you and I think that your recommendation is right on.
5 It is hard for us to plan long-term around a temporary
6 program, and also, homelessness often has so many factors
7 that go into it and providing a home is only one step in
8 combating that. So thank you for that. We will certainly
9 be working towards that.

10 Chairman Bozella, I wanted to thank you for mentioning
11 some of the creative therapies that are out there for
12 veterans. We have a great organization in Dallas called
13 Equest that does great work with our veterans through equine
14 therapy, which you mentioned specifically. And I am deeply
15 concerned, as many of the members who have spoken here today
16 are, about suicide prevention and what we can do to use
17 creative methods to provide our veterans with the care that
18 they need.

19 And when I visited with the VA in Dallas, which is the
20 second-largest VA in the country, they expressed interest in
21 having some help in working with some of the outside groups
22 to kind of better form other forms of therapies and to use
23 some of the resources that are at their disposal in a more
24 efficient way. What can we do, in Congress, to help those
25 organizations, work with our VA to make sure that all of the

1 resources that we have out there--and there are a number of
2 great groups out there that are doing this kind of work--
3 that they are actually at the fingertips of the VA?

4 Mr. Reistad. Chairman Bozella.

5 Mr. Bozella. Thank you, Commander. Thank you,
6 Congressman Allred. The number one thing that needs to
7 happen is for VA to believe that alternative therapies are,
8 in fact, viable, that they do work for people. One of the
9 things that they do is they help veterans stay in the
10 evidence-based therapies, the cognitive-based therapies, the
11 prolonged exposure. Some of that therapy can be very
12 difficult for people, and I am sure Dr. Roe would understand
13 that, how tough it is to relive a traumatic experience.

14 And sometimes they want to leave, and the CAM, we call
15 it, complementary and alternative medicines, keeps them
16 engaged. It does give them a sense of belonging and a sense
17 of purpose. The equine stuff I think you are referring, it
18 is almost magical what happens when veterans are teamed up
19 with a horse and they have to care for that horse. That is
20 a sense of purpose. That is a sense of belonging, having to
21 care for another being. And those kind of things work
22 tremendously.

23 So I think VA, they--and, by the way, they are coming
24 around to this stuff now, and it has taken a while but they
25 are getting there. I am glad to hear Dallas is interested.

1 You can talk to the American Legions, the VFWs in your
2 areas. You can get that kind of support from VSOs, and I am
3 sure they will be there for you.

4 Mr. Allred. We will do that. My time has expired but
5 I just wanted to again thank all of you for being here.
6 Thank you for your service to our country, and thank you so
7 much for helping us understand things that we need to be
8 working on to make sure that we keep our commitment to our
9 veterans.

10 Chairman Takano. The gentleman yields back. I would
11 now like to recognize myself for five minutes and just ask a
12 few questions.

13 Commander, the 2017 Government Accountability Office
14 report found that VA faces significant challenges in
15 recruiting and retaining employees. As we have said
16 earlier, as was said earlier in the hearing, over 10 percent
17 of full-time authorized and budgeted positions, funded
18 positions, amounts to about 45,000 vacancies, and most of
19 these being health care providers.

20 Does the Legion have some specific recommendations
21 about how VA can attract high-quality applicants and
22 recommendations on how to reduce the long and cumbersome
23 hiring and onboarding process at VA?

24 Mr. Reistad. Absolutely. Absolutely we do, Mr.
25 Chairman, and I would like to ask Chairman Bozella to please

1 address that question.

2 Mr. Bozella. Thank you, Commander. Representative
3 Chairman Takano, that is one of the--the number one causes
4 we see for the number of vacancies there are in VA health
5 care is the onboarding process. Yeah, there is a gap with
6 money, certainly, but the process, it takes three months or
7 longer to recruit, to interview, to do paperwork, to
8 actually bring that person on board is a very difficult
9 process.

10 I believe that Senator Cory Gardner from Colorado would
11 like to introduce legislation that is calling for a pilot
12 program in at least 10 VA sites to reduce the onboarding
13 process. That would make a difference.

14 Chairman Takano. So it is not my imagination. It is
15 not--you are verifying or validating some of the anecdotal
16 stories I am hearing about internists or specialists saying
17 they have not even received an acknowledgment they have
18 applied to the VA, and that these are people that want to
19 work for the VA and are highly employable, but the VA's
20 lengthy process of hiring has, you know, forced these
21 individuals to just take other employment before they accept
22 employment or even get interviewed at the VA.

23 Mr. Bozella. If I may, Commander--

24 Mr. Reistad. You may.

25 Mr. Bozella. --Mr. Chairman, if you think about some

1 of the really competitive health care environments in
2 certain cities--the Bay Area, Chanin and I were there just a
3 few weeks ago, and New York City, Denver, places that are
4 growing like that. And you have a competitive health care
5 environment and people are coming there applying for jobs,
6 and if it takes three to four month to get hired with the VA
7 for less money, or if they can get hired at a private
8 hospital much sooner, at more money, which way do you think
9 they would go?

10 Chairman Takano. Yeah. Well, one other question
11 related to this. Senator Sanders and I, in the Choice Act,
12 we were able to, along with other members and also the help
13 of the Republican--my Republican colleagues, we inserted
14 about 1,500 medical residencies into that bill, newly funded
15 medical residencies across the country. Do you believe that
16 the overall physician shortage is contributing to our
17 difficulties in hiring and retaining?

18 Mr. Bozella. Thank you, Commander. Mr. Chairman, yes,
19 the overall physician shortages, especially in rural areas,
20 absolutely does contribute to this particular problem.

21 Chairman Takano. Great. Well, I am going to yield--
22 cut my questions short. I want to give now Ranking Member
23 Roe his opportunity to give his closing statement.

24 Dr. Roe. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. A couple of things
25 on alternative therapy, Mr. Bozella. I asked some wounded

1 warriors, would they like to fish. And so the people that
2 were doing that, they said, "Yeah, but are they going to
3 catch any fish?" I said, "I can guarantee you they will. I
4 have a fish hatchery in my district, so we have worked that
5 out pretty well." They caught a lot of fish.

6 And back to hiring, as the Chairman is speaking of, he
7 is absolutely right. Look, I can hire someone in my
8 practice before VA can lick a stamp. They have got to get
9 their act together on hiring people quicker, these qualified
10 people, and especially on medical professionals--nurses,
11 PAs, all of that. You are 100 percent correct on that.

12 Thank you, and as we finish today I want to thank all
13 the Legion members who have taken their time away from their
14 families to come here today to be with us. I want to thank
15 you for that.

16 I would like to bring something to your attention,
17 Commander, and the folks in the room, and ask for your help.
18 And I know the VA--the Legion is an ardent supporter of all
19 constitutional rights.

20 Yesterday, we in the House voted on a rule that would
21 permit limited debate on legislation that would impact
22 veterans' Second Amendment rights. This bill, H.R. 1112
23 will be considered in the House later today, this afternoon,
24 a bill that unfortunately has had very little debate,
25 minimal committee process. A little-known and poorly

1 understood provision of this bill would amend the law to
2 read as follows: "It shall be unlawful to sell any firearm
3 or ammunition to any person knowing or having reasonable
4 cause to believe such person has been adjudicated with
5 mental illness, severe developmental disabilities, or severe
6 emotional instability."

7 To put this in perspective, there are over 1.6 million
8 disabled veterans with a service-connected adjudication by
9 VA of mental illness, including nearly 1 million with PTSD.
10 H.R. 1112 has the potential to add all names of those
11 veterans to the FBI's NICS list and prevent those veterans
12 from being able to purchase or possess a firearm. I offered
13 that amendment to clarify that veterans with VA mental
14 illnesses and other affected adjudication to be exempt from
15 the bill's standard, but that was ruled out of order.

16 Many people do not realize that the VA already
17 regularly sends the names of veterans who have a VA
18 fiduciary for inclusion on the NICS list, not because there
19 is a concern that the veteran might be a harm to themselves
20 or others but because VA has determined that that veteran
21 needs assistance in handling his or her financial benefits.

22 I am concerned that the expanded definition proposed in
23 H.R. 1112 would infringe on the Second Amendment rights of
24 millions of veterans solely because they sought the benefits
25 from VA that they have rightly earned to their service to

1 our country and now have been adjudicated with a service-
2 connected mental illness. But like those veterans with
3 fiduciaries, even though there may not be--there may not
4 have ever been a finding by judicial authority, a judge,
5 that the veteran possesses a danger to themselves or
6 society, these veterans would be told that they were good
7 enough to use a firearm to fight for our freedoms but not
8 good enough to bear arms as a civilian.

9 The last thing I want to do is discourage veterans from
10 seeking VA benefits because they are afraid it might cost a
11 constitutional right if they receive a rating decision for a
12 service-connected mental illness.

13 And look, we need your help with this, just to slow
14 this down and debate it, and everyone up here wants people
15 who are mentally unstable not to have a firearm. There is
16 not a person in this room that does not want that. But we
17 do not want veterans who protect the rights of the
18 Constitution to give up those rights.

19 Please, I ask for your help just to slow this down. I
20 do not think it was intended. I do not think that was an
21 intention with this bill, but I think that certainly is
22 going to be what happens.

23 Again, Mr. Chairman, thank you. It is a privilege to
24 serve with you on the Committee and I look forward to
25 working in the next--this Congress to carry out all the

1 things we talked about, and hopefully more, and with that I
2 yield back my time.

3 Chairman Takano. I thank the gentleman. I just want
4 to address briefly the concerns raised by my friend and
5 colleague, Phil Roe, about the bill that he mentioned. That
6 bill will not come up for a vote today. It will come up for
7 a vote tomorrow, scheduled for tomorrow.

8 I want to say that the concern arises out of, actually,
9 language that was meant to replace a more offensive, current
10 language, language in the current law, which refers to
11 people who are mentally defective. That is obviously
12 outdated, offensive language, and the Judiciary Committee
13 looked for--struggled to find language that would replace
14 the current language of "mentally defective." That is
15 wrong, that is terrible language, and that is actually in
16 the current law.

17 The language that is currently in the bill is meant to
18 be placeholder language. They are trying to find the right
19 terms, so that what Dr. Roe talked about--and he actually
20 said--he used the word "potentially," potentially. And we
21 are talking here about getting the language right so that it
22 cannot be interpreted in such a way that veterans who have
23 financial difficulties are not put on the NICS list. We
24 want to avoid that from happening. You know, people on my
25 side of the aisle are interested and committed to protecting

1 the Second Amendment rights, especially of our nation's
2 veterans.

3 And so the Chairman, Chairman Nadler, my understanding
4 is that he is writing a letter assuring that any final
5 language of the bill, before it is sent over to the Senate,
6 is corrected, and he is committed to working with the
7 veteran service organizations and getting this language
8 correct.

9 So stay tuned. We will be in communication. I have
10 been--as soon as I heard Dr. Roe bring this concern to
11 yesterday's joint hearing I immediately went into work, as
12 the Chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee in the
13 House, to work with the Democratic leadership to problem-
14 solve this particular issue.

15 But let me just say that I always, always enjoy these
16 joint hearings and hearing the priorities of the American
17 Legion. We will be meeting with the Secretary of the
18 Veterans Affairs Department today, Secretary Wilkie. I will
19 be pressing him on the question of will he be appealing the
20 Blue Water Navy decision, and I will encourage him to desist
21 from doing that. And regardless of his answers, we are
22 going to move forward with the Blue Water Navy bill, as I
23 have introduced it in this session of Congress, and we are
24 going to pass that bill, and we are going to press the
25 Senate to get it done, and we are going to get this issue

1 off the table in the 116th Congress.

2 [Applause.]

3 Chairman Takano. And I want to acknowledge that Dr.
4 Roe had taken this over the finish line in the House, and to
5 clarify there was some doubt about whether the vote was
6 unanimous. It was unanimous. Thank you, Phil Roe, for that
7 unanimous vote in the last Congress, and we are going to get
8 it done--we are going to get it done in the Senate, and what
9 I need your help with is to make sure that no Senator stands
10 in the way of Blue Water Navy--the Blue Water Navy bill
11 solution. So thank you.

12 Let me also say that I do appreciate the Legion's
13 stance on the 30-minute access standard. I do think it
14 still raises questions. It is potentially a good thing,
15 also potentially something that could result in a diversion
16 of precious health care dollars away from the existing
17 internal capacity of the VA to serve veterans.

18 It is potential. It is all a matter of how this
19 administration, you know, rolls out and implements the
20 Mission Act. And, of course, we will be working very
21 closely with the VA--with the American Legion, to make sure
22 that the rollout of the Mission Act and its implementation
23 is done in such a way that we build capacity, internal
24 capacity, and we are flexible enough to reach the veterans
25 where they are and to make sure they get health care that is

1 second to none.

2 We will also be doing our level best to make sure that
3 the Forever GI Bill is implemented, and I certainly do
4 appreciate the American Legion stance on closing the 90/10
5 loophole. That will do much to protect our student veterans
6 and to ensure that they are on their way to success in our
7 economy and the job market.

8 And with that--

9 Dr. Roe. Mr. Chairman, may I be recognized for just
10 one minute?

11 Chairman Takano. I will yield for--

12 Dr. Roe. Thank you. Just to clarify a few points on
13 this 1112, I am not trying to engage in fear-mongering but I
14 am concerned where H.R. 1112 may take us. It is my belief
15 that the Judiciary Committee did not mean to have this
16 negative impact on veterans. However, I do think that the
17 process of 1112 has been rushed and that is an unintended
18 consequence. Additionally, we cannot ignore the very real
19 implications for our veterans, even if that is not the
20 intent of the bill. It can happen.

21 I am also not saying that a simple diagnosis of a
22 mental health condition alone would amount to a veteran's
23 name being sent to the NICS list. On that, I think that the
24 NICS Improvement Act of 2007 is fairly clear. But right
25 now, via adjudications that certain veterans require a

1 fiduciary to handle their financial benefits are deemed to
2 meet adjudication as a mental defect, requirement under
3 Title 18, and those veterans are placed on the NICS list.

4 The process itself would not change as a result of H.R.
5 1112, only the definition. Under current law, quote, mental
6 defective definition is already binding on VA and based on
7 current law, VA regularly sends veterans' names to the FBI.
8 And again, under H.R. 1112, nothing about that process would
9 change, but the definition of who should be added to the
10 NICS list would be significantly expanded.

11 That is why I think it is a very real possibility that
12 VA ratings decisions that award service connection for PTSD
13 or other mental illnesses, just like current VA
14 adjudications that a veteran requires a fiduciary would
15 cause our nation's brave men and women who serve to lose
16 their constitutional rights to bear arms.

17 And to be clear, I am not saying that no veteran should
18 not be placed on this NICS list. We all know that is true.
19 But I do believe that we must tread very carefully and
20 ensure that proper due process is given and that a judicial
21 authority, not a VA rater or a bureaucrat, should be the one
22 who decides whether or not a veteran is a harm to themselves
23 or others before we look at infringing on their
24 constitutional rights. It is a slippery slope we are on.

25 Chairman Takano, I appreciate your indulgence. You

1 have been very good about this, and I yield back my time.

2 Chairman Takano. Well, I do believe in a robust and
3 thorough and complete discussion of the issues of the day,
4 including--and especially including the fundamental issues
5 of our constitutional rights and of the Second Amendment.

6 But let me just say that 90 percent of Americans--90
7 percent of Americans, including overwhelming majorities of
8 those who belong to the National Rifle Association, believe
9 that background checks are reasonable, and in order to make
10 those background checks effective we need to have, you know,
11 the NICS list also complete.

12 And that being said, we are working--I think working
13 with VSOs like the American Legion. The Chairman and the
14 parties can get this language correct. We are talking about
15 trying to replace outmoded, offensive language that already
16 exists in law, and to find that sweet spot in a law that
17 makes the NICS list complete but also does not unfairly--
18 unfairly and unjustly put our nation's veterans on those
19 lists.

20 So with that I would like to call--to adjourn these
21 proceedings, and thank you, the American Legion, for another
22 great year of testimony.

23 Mr. Reistad. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

24 [Applause.]

25 [Whereupon, at 12:36 p.m., the Joint Committees were

1 adjourned.]

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